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Feeling Confident:

A History of Self-Feeling in Twentieth-Century England

Emma Partridge

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School of Humanities

College of Arts & Humanities

University of Glasgow

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Covid-19 Impact Statement

I commenced my PhD in January 2021, during a period of national lockdown when COVID-19 restrictions were at their most severe. The pandemic impacted both the scope and content of my thesis, particularly in relation to access to physical primary and secondary source material.

Archive Access and Primary Sources

The most substantial impact on my research was the closure of archives and, subsequently, their restricted opening with limited hours. This constrained my ability to access the breadth of primary source material originally envisaged for my research. As a result, the primary sources utilised in Chapters 2 and 3 are limited to material available in digitised form online. This shaped the focus of both chapters. I found interwar publications on the 'inferiority complex' to be commonly digitised and easily searchable in online newspaper databases, while policy papers and reports are widely available online. Although I have made every effort to locate relevant digital collections, this restriction necessarily narrowed the range of sources and concepts I could consult, compared to what would have been possible under normal circumstances. Had archives been fully accessible throughout my studies, I would have been able to incorporate a wider array of supplementary archival materials, potentially including manuscripts, correspondence, and institutional records that remain undigitised.

Access to Secondary Literature

The pandemic also disrupted my access to printed secondary literature. Due to COVID-19, my living situation changed in ways that prevented me from relocating to be near my host institution. Consequently, I remained without physical access to the university library and its print collections for approximately one year. During this period, my engagement with secondary sources was restricted to materials available electronically or through limited inter-library loan services where these were operational. This affected my ability to consult monographs and more specialised works not available in digital format.

Mitigating Measures

I adapted my research scope where possible by maximising use of online databases, digital archives, and e-resources, particularly in Chapters 2 and 3. However, the fundamental constraint on the range of accessible primary sources, particularly for the early stages of my research, could not be fully mitigated and has shaped the evidential basis of the thesis as submitted.

Abstract

This thesis explores the history of self-feeling in twentieth-century England. It argues that self-referential emotions such as self-esteem, self-confidence, and inferiority-feeling underpinned new conceptualisations of childhood in this period. Ideas about how individuals feel – or ought to feel – about themselves influenced new understandings of children, positioned adults as emotional guardians, and spurred interventions designed to manage the self-concept of young people in England. This research challenges existing scholarship of self-feeling that positions self-esteem as a distinctively late twentieth-century American phenomenon linked to neoliberalism. It demonstrates that concern with self-feeling emerged much earlier in English culture as a contested mediator between individual development and social cohesion. Through examination of childrearing advice, education policy, grassroots initiatives, and child-led activism from the interwar period to the late 1980s, the thesis reveals how self-feeling operated not as a straightforward tool of individualisation but as a persistent and multifaceted source of anxious debate. Cultural concern with self-feeling reflected broader tensions about emotional vulnerability, educational purpose, and national progress. This thesis traces some of the processes through which psychological expertise became common sense, focusing on childhood as the primary site on which self-feeling was understood, negotiated, and applied. While adults were tasked with managing the self-feelings of children, children themselves emerged as complex negotiators who actively participated in constructing and transforming the emotional frameworks designed to regulate their development. By shedding light on these dynamics, this research offers a new lens for interpreting childhood emotion in modern England.

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***

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Abbreviations

LEA	Local Educational Authority
ILEA	Inner London Education Authority
BCCS	Bristol Crippled Children's Society
BCDA	Bristol Council for Disabled Adults
ACER	Afro-Caribbean Educational Resource
PPA	Pre-School Playgroups Association
FSC	Forest School Camps
SCPG	Southall Caribbean Parents Group
SAU	Schools Action Union
NUSS	National Union of School Students
SKAN	School Kids Against Nazis
NF	National Front

1. Introduction

In September 1931, novelist May Edginton issued a stark warning to the readers of the women's pictorial magazine *Britannia & Eve*. Declaring that 'to instil inferiority into a child is a crime which should count as soul murder', she positioned the child's self-feeling as a matter of life and death. 'In more enlightened times', she went on, 'to lift a sense of inferiority borne by a puny or unattractive child […] will come to rank with leprosy cures, or consumption cures or cancer cures'.[1] Edginton's pronouncement suggested that the cultivation of positive self-regard would become as central to medical and social progress as the conquest of devastating physical disease – a vision of a future where emotional wellbeing commanded the same urgent attention as bodily health. It was prescient, if dramatic.

Thirty-six years later in November 1967, a *Daily Mail* article about British youth seemed to confirm Edginton's prediction, although perhaps not in the way she had imagined. Reporting on a National Opinion Polls survey of more than 1,000 teenagers, the piece revealed that nearly two-thirds wished they possessed more self-confidence – a figure that rose to three-quarters among adolescent girls. One 18-year-old respondent explained: 'I'd like to have masses of clothes and lashings of self-confidence – it puts you at such a terrific advantage!' Self-confidence had indeed become valued currency by the late 1960s, something young people desired, alongside material possessions. Yet the persistence of this longing, decades after Edginton's call to arms, revealed a troubling gap between adult investment in children's self-feeling and its realisation in young people's lives. The enlightened times Edginton prophesied had seemingly arrived, but they had not delivered the cure she promised.

These two moments, separated by nearly four decades, frame the central concern of this thesis: why did self-feeling – encompassing self-esteem, self-confidence, and inferiority-feeling – become such a significant subject of interest and anxiety in twentieth-century England, especially for children and young people? And why did it often prove elusive?

1.1 A Culture of Self-Esteem

In Western cultures, self-feeling often functions as both a psychological ideal and a lifestyle ethic. Popular culture is saturated with an emotional vocabulary centred on the self. In 2019,

[1] May Edginton, 'Inferiority', *Britannia & Eve* 3.9 (September 1931), pp.70-1.

British singer Rebecca Lucy Taylor adopted the stage name *Self Esteem* in homage to the American drag artist RuPaul's famous mantra: 'If you can't love yourself, how the hell are you gonna love anybody else?'[2] The act of cultivating self-confidence has become what Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill call a 'cultural imperative', visible in fashion campaigns declaring 'confidence is the best thing you can wear' and in women's magazines heralding a 'confidence revolution'. The authors describe how the reach of self-esteem extended well beyond popular culture, with the British Army promising women that enlistment offers 'deep and lasting confidence', while workplace training courses increasingly promote confidence and assertiveness.[3]

In mid-1980s California, self-esteem had become central to public health and social reform. In 1986, Senator John Vasconcellos launched the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, which sought to determine whether self-esteem might serve as a 'social vaccine' to prevent problems ranging from teenage pregnancy to drug addiction.[4] In twenty-first century England, The National Citizen Service placed self-confidence at the centre of youth development programmes from 2009, while in 2014, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility published a *Character and Resilience Manifesto*, which concluded that 'character counts', particularly traits enabling people to 'overcome adversity and realise their full potential'.[5] Self-esteem was at the forefront of the agenda, with research cited that identified a connection between self-esteem and resilience of young people, as well as in delivering better academic results.[6] In this vision, positive self-feeling was the key to instilling a 'belief in one's ability to achieve'.[7] Today, self-esteem has become an asset, deeply embedded in institutional ambitions for both individuals and the nation.

Popular interest in self-feeling is inseparable from the academic interest in 'self-esteem' – the more precise term chosen by psychologists, particularly in the 1960s, who were central in devising and promoting measurements and categories of self-feeling. The American

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[2] Mark Savage, 'Self Esteem: the Bigger I Get, the More Threatening I Become', *BBC News* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-62205517> [accessed 15th June 2025].
[3] Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill, *Confidence Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).
[4] California State Dept. of Education, *Toward a State of Esteem: The Final Report of the California Task Force to Promote Self-esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility* (1990).
[5] The National Citizen Service closed down in March 2025 amid cuts to funding; Chris Paterson, Claire Tyler, and Jen Lexmond, *Character and Resilience Manifesto: Report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility* (2014), p.4.
[6] *Ibid.,* p.5.
[7] *Ibid.,* p.4.

psychologists Stanley Coopersmith and Morris Rosenberg were particularly instrumental, each providing measurement scales and analytical frameworks for capturing and categorising self-worth. Coopersmith described self-esteem as 'a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds toward himself', emphasising both internal evaluation and emotional feeling.[8] His influential 1967 work provided enduring categories as well as measurement scales for distinguishing high and low self-esteem. High self-esteem correlated with poise, effectiveness and independence; low self-esteem with social withdrawal and emotional fragility.[9] With newfound measurability, self-esteem was increasingly attached to individual and social problems. By 1976, L. Edward Wells and Gerald Marwell observed that the concept had been 'related to almost everything at one time or another', from juvenile delinquency to marital harmony.[10] By the turn of the twenty-first century, references to self-esteem in psychological literature numbered in the thousands per year and by 2017, Virgil Zeigler-Hill reported that over 35,000 research papers had addressed the topic.[11] As historian Ian Miller observed, self-esteem had evolved into 'arguably the most influential psychological concept', deployed to explain 'all manner of personal, emotional, and social problems'.[12]

With interest came scrutiny, and a degree of scepticism. In the 1980s, sociologist Neil Smelser suggested many claimed associations between self-esteem and positive outcomes were 'mixed, insignificant, or absent'.[13] In 2004, Thomas Scheff and David Fearon echoed this conclusion, arguing that academic studies using self-esteem scales to predict a host of outcomes had 'been a whaling expedition that has caught, at best, minnows'.[14] Despite the ambivalence of some psychologists, the concept has endured in the popular imagination. Its appeal lies not solely in the interest it continues to attract from psychologists and policy-makers, but in what Nicholas Emler describes as its intuitive appeal and longstanding presence in everyday discourse. For Emler, self-esteem is 'not the property of psychology', and instead 'has been in common English usage for over four centuries'.[15] Similarly,

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[8] Stanley Coopersmith, *The Antecedents of Self-esteem* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1967), p.5.
[9] Ibid., pp.249-50.
[10] Edward L. Wells and Gerald Marwell, *Self-esteem: its Conceptualization and Measurement* (London: Sage Publications, 1976), pp.5-6.
[11] Nicholas Emler, *Self-esteem: the Costs and Causes of Low Self-worth* (Layerthorpe: Joseph Rowntree Foundation YPS, 2001), p.2; Virgil Ziegler-Hill, *Self-esteem* (Hove, Psychology Press, 2013), p.11.
[12] Ian Miller, *Self-esteem: An American History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024), p.10.
[13] Neil Smelser, cited in John Hewitt, *The Myth of Self-esteem: Finding Happiness and Solving Problems in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp.59-60.
[14] Thomas Scheff and David S. Fearon, 'Cognition and Emotion? The Dead End in Self-esteem Research', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 34.1 (2004), p.73.
[15] Emler, *Self-esteem*, p.2.

Chrisopher Mruk notes that self-esteem sustains appeal given its applicability to 'ordinary problems of living' as well as notions of health, success and 'the "good life"'.[16] Alan F. Collins and colleagues echo Emler and Mruk in observing that 'pronouncing on the self has never been the sole preserve of psychology and psychologists'. They trace its history of application 'in wider spiritual, moral, and sociopolitical debates' from as early as the seventeenth century.[17] Indeed, in 1693 the English philosopher John Locke had written about self-confidence in public schools, arguing that dancing in public schools might help young girls overcome 'sheepishness', while warning against the sin of overconfidence: 'too much shamefacedness better becomes a girl than too much confidence'.[18] Self-feeling has longstanding moral, cultural and social connotations that sit alongside and inform its place in the canon of academic psychology.

Another explanation of self-esteem's enduring resonance is the place self-feeling occupies at the intersections of cognition and emotion: it influences both how people *think*, and how they *feel* about themselves. Scottish psychologist Alexander Bain described self-esteem as derived from the 'tender emotion' turned inward, requiring complex psychological abilities including self-recognition and social comparison.[19] William James' 1890 definition emphasised both evaluative cognition and affective experience, whilst Christopher Mruk later summarised how scholars conceptualised self-esteem through two intersecting processes: 'affect' and 'evaluation'.[20] Because of its position at this intersection, self-feeling represents a unique lens through which to explore the interaction and influence of psychology and emotion in constructions of selfhood. As Collins and colleagues observe, self-esteem had become 'an almost routine way of talking about, thinking about, and acting upon human relations and on ourselves'.[21] Similarly, in a recent history of the concept, Ian Miller notes that self-esteem 'became *the* way of understanding ourselves, our personalities, our interactions with others'.[22]

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[16] Christopher Mruk, *Self-esteem Research, Theory and Practice: Toward a Positive Psychology of Self-Esteem* (New York: Springer, 2006), p.15.
[17] Alan F. Collins, George Turner, and Susan Condor, 'A History of Self-Esteem: From a Just Honouring to a Social Vaccine', in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Human Sciences,* ed. David McCallum (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022), p.1118.
[18] Correspondence of John Locke and Edward Clark, ed. Rand, p.104, cited in *The Public Schools and the General Educational System: The Fleming Report,* HMSO 1944, p.113.
[19] Collins et al., 'A history of self-esteem', p.1128.
[20] Mruk, *Self-esteem Research*, p.23.
[21] Collins et al., 'A history of self-esteem', p.1117.
[22] Miller, *Self-esteem,* p.1.

Despite the apparent role of self-esteem in human behaviour, experience, and interaction, relatively few scholars have approached the history of self-feeling with rigour.[23] This thesis sets out to expose and then address some of the current gaps in knowledge about the history of self-feeling. Throughout, the term 'self-feeling' is used deliberately to capture the historically varied and shifting language used to describe self-oriented emotions, while avoiding anachronistic impositions of specific psychological categories and terms like self-esteem. 'Self-feeling' pertains to a range of what John Hewitt describes as 'self-referential emotions', encompassing self-confidence, inferiority-feeling, and self-esteem which were all used frequently in the twentieth century.[24] By examining the twentieth century as a whole, this study positions self-feeling not as a late arrival linked to late-modern neoliberalism, but as a long-running and culturally embedded concern which shaped – and was shaped by – evolving ideas about emotion and society. It contends that self-feeling emerged not through top-down imposition by policymakers or psychologists, but through uneasy and ongoing negotiation between psychological expertise and everyday experience. Rather than assuming simple linear transformation, this thesis follows scholars such as Claire Langhamer, Jon Lawrence and Teri Chettiar in tracing the tension-filled, 'messy' dynamics of self and society during what has been called England's 'emotional revolution'.[25] Emotions like self-esteem functioned not merely as personal virtues, but as cultural frameworks for mediating the relationship between the individual and society in twentieth-century England. In charting shifting conceptual and practical approaches to self-feeling, this thesis offers a more nuanced understanding of how emotional life both reflected and reshaped conceptions of childhood and citizenship in the twentieth century, and what this meant for those for whom its discourse was intended.

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[23] Explicitly historiographical accounts of self-esteem are limited: see Steven Ward, 'Filling the World with Self-esteem: A Social History of Truth-making', *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 21.1 (1996), pp.1-23.; Collins et al., 'A history of self-esteem'; and most recently Ian Miller's *Self-Esteem: An American History* (2024).
[24] Hewitt, The Myth of Self-esteem, p.125.
[25] Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.28.; Teri Chettiar, *The Intimate State: How Emotional Life Became Political in Welfare-State Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p.7.; Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?: The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.20.

1.2 Histories of Self-Feeling

Having established the contemporary ubiquity of self-feeling discourse, this section examines how scholars have approached the concept to date.[26] Although limited in number, existing work by sociologists, social psychologists, and anthropologists has fulfilled the anti-universalist impulse of the history of emotions by situating self-esteem in time and place. These accounts tend to focus on the specific language of self-esteem, framing it as a recent development to emphasise its resonance in modern society. Ian Miller locates interest in self-esteem squarely in the period after the Second World War, arguing that after 1945, 'self-esteem truly began to concern Westerners in ways that it previously hadn't'.[27] Ole Madsen reinforces this chronology through linguistic analysis of self-esteem, observing that 'the concept was completely absent in everyday language well into the 1960s'.[28] Frank Furedi narrowed this chronology further still, arguing that self-esteem was 'virtually unknown and unheard by the public in the 1970s'.[29]

Existing histories of self-esteem also share a specificity in geographical scope, focusing almost invariably on late twentieth-century USA. Ian Miller explicitly acknowledges this in a recent history of the concept, concluding that 'there was something particularly *American* about self-esteem', while John Hewitt similarly positioned self-esteem as 'part of the [American] cultural mythology. It's American exceptionalism.'[30] The story of self-esteem in the United States is told through the work and impact of individual psychologists. It follows a predictable trajectory beginning with the late-nineteenth century American psychologist William James, through dormancy during the behaviourist period, to a proliferation of academic interest in the 1960s, culminating in the 1980s 'self-esteem movement' when the concept transferred from the careful hands of the expert and into the pages of self-help books, magazines, and television. Steven Ward's early historicisation of self-esteem exemplifies this narrative, tracing self-esteem's evolution from a 'fragile idea' in academic psychology to a

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[26] In the interest of brevity this introduction focuses on sociological, historiographical, and anthropological approaches to self-feeling. It does not provide a thorough account of psychological approaches to self-esteem. For an overview of self-esteem in academic psychology, see Emler, *Self-Esteem* (2001).
[27] Miller, *Self-Esteem*, p.2.
[28] Ole Jacob Madsen, *Optimising the Self: Social Representations of Self-Help* (Hove: Routledge, 2015), p.103.
[29] Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.2.
[30] Miller, *Self-esteem,* p.2.; John Hewitt, quoted in Will Storr, *Selfie: How the West Became Self-obsessed* (London: Picador, 2018), p.206.

widely accepted truth about human nature through the influence of a handful of key theorists and technologies.[31]

Where histories of self-esteem consider the social and cultural impact of the concept, they are largely critical, presenting self-esteem as both symptom and vehicle of individualistic capitalism. Ian Miller argued that Westerners live in 'an "emotional environment" shaped by capitalism and individualism', positioning self-esteem as both a product and a driver of these forces.[32] In their account of 'confidence culture' in the global West, Orgad and Gill argue that confidence imperatives are inseparable from 'the enduring and pervasive impact of neoliberalism as an organising force'.[33] Similarly, Eva Moskowitz argues that therapeutic culture has replaced traditional social distinctions with a 'belief that feelings are sacred and salvation lies in self-esteem'.[34] This framing reflects a broader consensus among scholars who have identified self-esteem as integral to what Eva Illouz termed 'emotional capitalism' – a system that not only commands feelings but prescribes their appropriate manifestations in capitalist society.[35]

In emphasising the academic and political influence of self-esteem, these accounts tend to employ dramatic metaphors that emphasise totalising influence rather than gradual negotiation. Christopher Mruk describes the 'sudden eruption of interest in self-esteem' as 'somewhat analogous to what biologists call the "Cambrian Explosion"', while Harrison describes 'academic lift-off' from the 1960s.[36] Focusing more on the cultural implications of self-esteem, John Hewitt has described self-esteem as a pseudo-scientific cultural 'myth' while Orgad and Gill opt for the vivid metaphor of 'cult.'[37] Psychiatrist Glynn Harrison warns that it has become a 'self-replicating cultural unit', infecting the spheres of education, health, and religion 'like a virus.'[38]

By highlighting the temporal and cultural specificity of certain attitudes to self-feeling, these narratives present an opportunity to expose the social relevance of ostensibly individualising

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[31] Ward, 'Filling the World with Self-esteem', p.1; other accounts that make use of this narrative include Hewitt, 'The Myth of Self-esteem' (1998); Glynn Harrison, *The Big Ego Trip* (Nottingham: Inter Varsity Press, 2013).
[32] Miller, *Self-Esteem,* p.2.
[33] Orgad & Gill, *Confidence Culture,* p.16.
[34] Eva Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), p.1.
[35] Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) cited in Orgad & Gill, *Confidence Culture,* p.17.
[36] Mruk, *Self-esteem Research*, p.18; Harrison, *The Big Ego Trip*, pp.41-3.
[37] Hewitt, *The Myth of Self-esteem*; Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture*, p.5.
[38] Harrison, *The Big Ego Trip*, p.20.

psychological concepts like self-esteem. In doing so, they demonstrate powerfully the utility of self-feeling to overcome what historians have criticised as a tendency in the history of psychology 'to ignore [the] *relational* core of feeling', framing emotions as 'purely internal affair[s]'.[39] In situating self-esteem in time and place, these accounts attend to the 'radical anti-universalism' of the history of emotions.[40] As Susan Matt and Peter Stearns argue, social norms and values shape emotional 'expression, repression and meaning' through naming feelings, and 'assigning values to some and not others'.[41] In histories of self-esteem, the concept is framed not as 'a biological universal' and instead, like other emotions scrutinised by historians, 'something that must be named in order to exist within a particular culture'.[42]

Existing accounts of self-esteem also complement efforts in the history of psychology to characterise the twentieth century as a particularly important period. Mathew Thomson, for example, has examined how Britons became 'psychological subjects' in the last century, as psychological thought mediated 'a wide range of social and economic, political, and ethical issues that rested on assumptions about human nature.'[43] As Ian Miller observes, these subjects became accustomed to viewing themselves 'in affective terms'.[44] Similarly, Michal Shapira's account of psychoanalysis demonstrated how 'psychoanalysts were crucial to describing the kind of selfhood required of democratic citizens during and after the war', showing that 'our basic notions of a normal self in a democratic society' developed through 'an intense historical period' rather than being ahistorical.[45] Teri Chettiar describes this 'psychopolitical' turn as 'one of the most important transformations of Western political life in the second half of the twentieth century.'[46] If both emotions and psychological constructs are historically contingent, then concepts like self-esteem which pertain to both require similar historical scrutiny within this context of psychologisation.

The implications extend beyond emotions to selfhood itself. Nikolas Rose demonstrated that 'the unified self is a construction', formed particularly through 'the vocabularies and

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[39] Graham Richards and Paul Stenner, *Putting Psychology in its Place: Critical Historical Perspectives,* Fourth Edition (London: Routledge, 2023), p.126.
[40] Katie Barclay, 'State of the Field: The History of Emotions', *History* 106.371 (2021), p.457.
[41] Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns, *Doing Emotions History* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2014), p.2.
[42] Barcley, 'State of the Field', p.458.
[43] Mathew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.1.
[44] Miller, *Self-Esteem,* p.6.
[45] Michal Shapira, *The War Inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War, and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.17.
[46] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.2.

narratives' of psychology.[47] Charles Taylor also argued that the modern sense of self was constructed through multiple sources, making it 'a much more contingent, heterogeneous, culturally relative notion than it purports to be'.[48] In a similar vein, Roy Baumeister identified the 'problematic' self as 'essentially a modern phenomenon', arguing that in the medieval period, 'lords and serfs did not struggle with self-definition the way modern persons do'.[49] Ultimately, he argues that 'the self has *become* a problem in the course of historical development.'[50] In histories of self-feeling, self-esteem has become central to ideas about the modern construction of self. Will Storr describes the 1980s 'ideal self' as 'an extroverted, slim, beautiful, individualistic, optimistic, hard-working, socially aware yet high-self-esteeming global citizen'.[51] This ideal represents the fusion of psychological discourse with neoliberal values, creating what critical authors view as a fundamentally commodified form of selfhood.

What emerges in existing histories of self-feeling is a well-worn narrative of a concept, born and sustained in academic psychology, functioning to uphold the principles of neoliberal individualism in the United States. On one hand, this contributes powerfully to the deconstruction of the idea that psychological concepts are natural and universal, but on the other, this narrative tells us little about those for whom self-esteem discourse was supposedly designed to transform into neoliberal citizens. The focus on expert-driven imposition marginalises popular engagement, whilst dramatic metaphors of viral spread obscure the complex negotiations through which people encountered, experienced, interpreted, and potentially resisted psychological frameworks. By emphasising totalising transformation, these accounts leave little room for experience, resistance, or contextual variation. The remainder of this section explores some of these limitations in more detail, and uses additional insights from histories of emotion and psychology to suggest how they can be overcome.

Critical Perspectives

A first limitation to address is the link drawn between self-esteem and popular individualism, particularly in the accounts that frame it as both a symptom and a tool of neoliberal politics.

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[47] Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Ourselves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.9.
[48] Charles Taylor, cited in Rose, *Inventing Ourselves,* pp.5-6.
[49] Roy Baumeister, 'How the Self Became a Problem: A Psychological Review of Historical Research', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52.1 (1987), p.163.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Storr, *Selfie,* pp.18-9.

These accounts consistently reference individualisation, cultural selfishness and sometimes narcissism, revealing what John Hewitt identifies as self-esteem's capacity to 'touch a sensitive cultural nerve.'[52] Scholars have identified therapeutic culture as the mechanism through which individualisation occurred, with self-esteem framed as an important aspect of this broader cultural shift. Miller argues that Western societies 'developed a therapeutic culture hellbent on personal transformation without consideration of structural forces'.[53] This therapeutic turn made 'the individual psyche the primary object of […] attention' while treating 'its improper functioning' as the explanation of social ills.[54] Within this framework, self-esteem emerges as a key psychological tool for personal transformation.

Critics argue this represented a fundamental shift from collective approaches toward individualised psychological interventions that obscured structural inequalities. Critical self-esteem scholarship has regularly conflated the concept with narcissism in a pathological framework. Christopher Lasch's influential 1978 work *The Culture of Narcissism* established the template for understanding self-focus as symptomatic of social fragmentation, whilst Jean Twenge linked rising self-esteem to generational narcissism, labelling contemporary youth 'Generation Me'.[55] Other scholars root the growing interest in self-feeling in 1960s counterculture rather than later neoliberalism, but frame it in equally individualistic terms. Bernice Martin linked societal breakdown to the 'expressive revolution' that detracted from 'natural social rootedness', while Glynn Harrison argues that self-esteem was able to 'surf the sexual revolution of the 1960s' and 'thrived in the new humanisms of the 1970s and materialistic orgies of the 1980s'.[56] Theological critiques emerged from both secular and religious commentators, with Harrison lamenting that the sin of pride had been supplanted by 'the transgression of "not liking myself enough"'.[57] Christian psychologist Paul C. Vitz similarly portrayed psychology as 'a cult of self-worship' wherein 'self-help amounts to

[52] Hewitt, *The Myth of Self-Esteem*, p.3.
[53] Miller, *Self-Esteem,* p.11.
[54] Timothy Aubry and Trysh Travis (eds), *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.1.
[55] Elizabeth Lunbeck, 'Narcissism: Social Critique in Me- Decade America', in *Engineering Society: The Role of Human and Social Sciences in Modern Societies, 1880-1980,* ed. Kerstin Brueckweh, Dirk Schumann, Richard F. Wetzell, Benjamin Ziemann (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.206.; Jean M. Twenge, 'The Evidence for Generation Me Against Generation Me', *Emerging Adulthood* 1.1 (2013), p.11.
[56] Bernice Martin, *A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1981), p.16.; Harrison, *The Big Ego Trip,* p.18.
[57] Harrison, *The Big Ego Trip,* p.16.

atheism'.[58] These frameworks consistently positioned individualistic psychology as both symptom and cause of social atomisation.

Critical narratives of self-feeling follow two related historiographical trends. On one hand, they mirror developments in histories and sociologies of other ostensibly positive traits and states, such as happiness. As Sara Ahmed argues, 'it matters how we think about feeling'.[59] Ahmed's influential work advocates 'suspending belief that happiness is a good thing', examining instead 'how happiness participates in making things good'.[60] Barbara Ehrenreich similarly criticised the contemporary preoccupation with positive mindset as 'an apology for the crueller aspects of the market economy', whilst Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz argued that the pursuit of happiness had become a fundamental aspect of 'the victory of individualism over collectivism'.[61] These accounts offer valuable insights by revealing how emotions can function as tools of power and control. Crucially, these approaches illuminate how emotions can be stratified and withheld from certain populations, with Ahmed demonstrating how happiness imperatives often exclude those who fail to conform to normative expectations whilst appearing to offer universal benefits. Such scholarship reveals the political dimensions of emotional discourse and challenges assumptions about emotions as purely personal experiences.[62] Critical approaches, however, follow a tendency described by historian Jon Lawrence to uncritically juxtapose a nostalgic, community-oriented vision of the past with the selfish, socially fragmented present. He observes accusations and fears on the left and right of the political spectrum about the inevitability of 'social disintegration' and a trend towards 'selfish individualism', particularly in the last decades of the twentieth century.[63]

Historians of individualism and community have sought to destabilise this social theory binary. Teri Chettiar seeks to problematise the assumption 'that individualism triumphed in the twentieth-century', weakening the triumph narrative by recognising 'the political and personal importance of close personal relationships'.[64] In a similar vein, Lawrence urges historians to recognise 'new forms of […] community' rather than assuming 'better forms'

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[58] Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1977), cited in Miller, *Self-Esteem,* p.7.
[59] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p.6.
[60] Ibid., p.13.
[61] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World* (London: Granta Books, 2010), p.8.; Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens: How the Science and Industry of Happiness Control Our Lives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), p.9.
[62] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p.13.
[63] Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?* p.239.
[64] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.10.

existed in the past.[65] In the context of psychology, several authors have embraced the complexity of the therapeutic, pointing to its various social implications that render a framework that polarises self and society problematic. Timothy Aubry and Trysh Travis describe therapeutic culture as 'a complex web of shared assumptions, behaviours, and institutions', rather than a narrow focus on the individual. As a result, when therapeutic culture is simplified in critical perspectives, it results in 'a cultural history of the therapeutic that is conceptually thin, ideologically blinkered, and, unsurprisingly, not very useful.'[66] Similarly, Mathew Thomson invites the historian to explore beyond 'individualist and emotionalist' versions of psychology and instead consider 'how psychology in different circumstances could foster the imagining of social dimensions of the self'.[67]

More recently, accounts have begun to acknowledge such a social role for self-esteem. Collins and colleagues provided important correction to individualistic interpretations, noting that 'the cultivation of self-esteem was never seen as a wholly individual affair'.[68] The authors identify early expert interest in self-esteem and self-feeling, contextualising it within social change long before the advent of neoliberalism. The authors cite Kurt Lewin's 1930s work on 'Jewish self-hatred' in the context of growing antisemitism in Europe which treated self-esteem as fundamentally shaped by group membership, reframing self-feeling 'as a powerful psychological tool for addressing pressing social issues'.[69] Similarly, Ian Miller's research demonstrates how social activists and campaigners 'harnessed self-esteem to promote freedom, liberation, and social equality' by linking 'low self-esteem to social injustice'.[70] Miller notes that these activists were 'deeply cognisant of the relationships between the structural and the emotional', demonstrating that 'radicalism and therapy are not always entirely at odds'.[71] As early as the 1970s, Wells and Marwell's review of self-esteem psychology connected self-esteem to social movements, noting that feminist, gay and civil rights movements had 'all focused on a decreased sense of self-esteem in certain groups of

[65] Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?,* pp.19-20.
[66] Aubry and Travis, *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture*, p.3.
[67] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.9.
[68] Collins et al, 'A History of Self-Esteem', p.1140.
[69] Ibid., p.1133.
[70] Miller, *Self-Esteem,* pp.16-7.
[71] Ibid.

persons'.[72] Historians have since noted that second-wave feminist represented 'an exemplary alliance between therapeutic culture and political activism'.[73]

Critical accounts of self-esteem also tend to neglect another aspect of its complexity – its moral valence which was often multifaceted and shifted over time. Accounts of neoliberal enthusiasm among experts and politicians neglect prominent critiques that existed alongside the 'explosion' of self-esteem by the 1970s. Aubry and Travis documented extensive criticism from therapeutic culture's late nineteenth-century emergence, noting that '[n]o sooner did it emerge as a salient phenomenon than the therapeutic worldview became an object of scathing critique'.[74] Collins and colleagues also note that perpetual anxieties accompanied self-esteem discourse, arguing that 'from its inception, there were concerns about deficit and more particularly excess' of self-esteem.[75] They describe how self-esteem prompted immediate tensions when it was first recorded in the seventeenth century, with Reverend Richard Baxter treating self-esteem as 'a sin akin to pride' while author John Milton simultaneously emerged as 'an early defender of the potential merits of self-esteem'.[76] They observe that the 'elusive nature' of this 'appropriate amount' made self-esteem a 'constant resource for anxious debates about the state of the self'.[77]

This pattern of change exposes the need for approaches that recognise shifting perceptions of self-referential emotional norms, rather than linking self-esteem rigidly to a particular climate of popular individualism. As this thesis will aim to show, moments of popular anxiety and criticism about self-feeling are themselves historically contingent and specific. Understanding this shifting valence is crucial for recognising how different contexts approached self-feeling, challenging static accounts that assume and privilege fixed meaning. Moreover, these accounts help paint a picture of self-esteem that permits its socially orient*ed* characteristics, as well as those that were socially orient*ing*. More often than not, self-esteem was invoked to understand the relationship between the individual and the social world.

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[72] Edward L. Wells and Gerald Marwell, *Self-Esteem: Its Conceptualization and Measurement* (London: Sage Publications, 1976), pp.252-3.
[73] Aubry and Travis, *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture*, pp.21-2.; see also Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*.
[74] Aubry and Travis, *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture*, pp.8-9.
[75] Collins et al, 'A History of Self-Esteem', p.1117.
[76] Ibid., pp.1120-1.
[77] Ibid., pp.1117-8.

Governmentality

As a result of the frequent connection drawn between self-esteem and neoliberal politics, self-feeling is often framed as a tool of governance in the Foucauldian notion of 'governmentality'. Drawing on Foucault, the sociologist Nikolas Rose argued that psychological knowledge provided 'languages and technologies that would shape the modern self' and positioned psychological strategies that govern through the creation of these 'techniques of self'.[78] This was a reformulation of political power that Mathew Thomson describes as a 'modern system of psychological government'.[79] In Rose's model, 'the clinical interview, the psychological test, and the epidemiological survey' act as 'micropowers' of governance.[80]

Historians of emotions have used notions of governance effectively to help explain how emotions work as tools of power and social stratification. Sara Ahmed has observed how proximity to 'happiness' functions as both 'social as well as moral distinction' in modern society, while Teri Chettiar has highlighted how norms of heteronormativity underpin prescriptions about healthy family intimacy in postwar Britain.[81] Katie Barclay explains that across social categories including gender, race and class, there are 'significant dividing lines in emotional life' that result in stratified emotional expectations related to social status.[82] Barbara Cruikshank's pioneering analysis examined self-esteem programmes as 'practical techniques for the subjection of individuals' within a democracy, describing how self-improvement became social governance, linking 'personal goals and desires to social order and stability'. Cruikshank described this relationship between power and subjectivity as a 'state of esteem'.[83] Ian Miller describes a similar phenomenon in the specific context of neoliberalism, arguing that individuals equate self-esteem with health and normality 'largely because psychologists have told us so', with therapy functioning as 'a vehicle that conveyed Reaganite notions of individual responsibility'. Crucially, Miller frames this as a new form of

[78] Mathew Thomson, 'The Psychological Sciences and the "Scientization" and "Engineering" of Society in Twentieth-Century Britain', in *Engineering Society: The Role of Human and Social Sciences in Modern Societies, 1880-1980,* ed. Kerstin Brueckweh, Dirk Schumann, Richard F. Wetzell, Benjamin Ziemann (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.141.; Johan Louw, 'Constructing Subjectivity in Unexpected Places', in *Internationalizing the History of Psychology,* ed. Adrian C. Brock (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p.25.
[79] Thomson, 'The Psychological Sciences', p.141.
[80] Louw, 'Constructing Subjectivity', p.25.
[81] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p.13; Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.4.
[82] Barclay, 'State of the Field', p.463.
[83] Barbara Cruikshank, 'Revolutions Within: Self-Government and Self-Esteem', *Economy and Society* 22.3 (1993), p.327.

governance during a time in which scepticism of totalitarianism rendered 'overtly authoritarian forms of governance […] out of the question'.[84] This framework presents self-esteem as a totalising force operating through 'voluntary compliance' rather than overt coercion.[85] Scholars employ metaphors of 'disease', 'cult', and 'myth' to describe this apparently sinister political power.[86] In this narrative, ordinary people are the unsuspecting victims of the 'simplicity, ubiquity and seductiveness' of self-esteem messaging.[87]

Governance-based accounts typically follow a predictable chronology of a small number of theorists whose work is eventually appropriated by self-help authors and politicians. They rely on narrow understandings of expertise, usually privileging American psychologists whilst neglecting figures like Alexander Bain from Scotland, whom Collins and colleagues position as crucial to self-esteem's rise to prominence in the psychology discipline.[88] The focus on a narrow range of academic psychologists also overlooks the contributions of multiple psychoanalysts and parenting experts who disseminated ideas about self-feeling to the masses, including British figures like Catherine Gasquoine Hartley and James Hemming who warned parents about preserving children's self-esteem before the middle of the twentieth century. In his account of self-esteem in the US, Hewitt invokes Howard Becker's notion of 'moral enterprise', labelling the individual actors responsible for selling the benefits of self-esteem 'conceptual entrepreneurs'.[89] The plurality of these 'entrepreneurs' has recently been explored in greater detail. Indeed, Collins and colleagues suggest attention ought to be paid to 'social developments and changes in psychological thinking' in the period before the 1960s, which they argue 'were critical to [self-esteem's] subsequent rapid rise', pointing to the role of religion, child psychology, and phrenology amongst other developments.[90]

Historians of both psychology and emotion have warned against ascribing too much power to psychology given that it is itself a reflexive discipline that engages with its subjects in producing its language. As several scholars of self-esteem have pointed out, self-esteem was already 'a term in common day-to-day usage' before it was incorporated into the practices of academic psychologists, suggesting psychologists were attempting to appropriate and

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[84] Miller, *Self-Esteem,* p.12.
[85] Ibid., p.15.
[86] See Harrison, *The Big Ego Trip*; Hewitt*, The Myth of Self-Esteem*; Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture*.
[87] Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture,* p.11.
[88] Collins et al, 'A History of Self-Esteem', p.1127.
[89] Hewitt, *The Myth of Self-Esteem*, p.49.
[90] Collins et al, 'A History of Self-Esteem', p.1131.

redefine concepts already circulating in popular discourse rather than creating entirely new frameworks.[91] Ian Miller argues that 'there is no simple distinction between "constructed" and "real"' – the 'low self-esteem person' becomes, in Ian Hacking's vision of psychology, a 'moving target' whose behaviour changes in response to new psychological knowledge, necessitating experts to continually 'reclassify'.[92] This approach recognises that psychological concepts operate within complex cultural negotiations rather than simple top-down imposition, revealing the inadequacy of totalising narratives that position self-esteem as an all-powerful tool of social control.

Moreover, historians of psychology have specifically critiqued approaches that assume expert influence without examining how ideas were received, modified, or resisted in practice. Regarding expert-oriented histories of psychology, Mathew Thomson warns against 'a tendency to assume their influence' which overlooks 'the way these failed or changed because of messy politics, competing interests, and economic realities'.[93] This expert-centrism creates what Thomson identifies as a false binary that 'closes down the space for exploring the full nature of excitement about psychology'.[94] To address these limitations, Thomson and others have challenged assumptions of 'governance' and expert influence by highlighting instances of popular engagement, negotiation, resistance, and ridicule of psychological ideas. Mike Savage argues that Rose 'overstates the importance of the psy-disciplines' and instead urges focus on a wider pool of disciplines, notably the social sciences in order to problematise assumptions about 'the overarching power of a unifying discourse'.[95] Similarly, Thomson's analysis of 'largely unappreciated practices, movements, and debates' around psychology in Britain concludes that the influence of psychology was simultaneously greater than permitted in top-down models, given the excitement around the possibilities it contained, as well as less, in the 'relative underdevelopment' of psychology in the British context.[96]

But overt resistance is not the only way in which individuals negotiated emotional and cultural norms. Historians have also demonstrated that activists could appropriate and expand emotional and psychological norms for subversive ends. Deborah Gould's analysis of the

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[91] Wells and Marwell, *Self-Esteem,* pp.8-9.
[92] Miller, *Self-Esteem,* p.9.
[93] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.7.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain Since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.12.
[96] Thomson, 'The Psychological Sciences', p.153.

AIDS campaigning group ACT UP reveals that 'feeling and emotion are fundamental to political life', exploring 'how political feelings are generated, sustained, and altered' through collective action.[97] In the British context, Teri Chettiar's work on emotional intimacy demonstrates how activists 'sought inclusion within the intimacy paradigm' whereby notions of intimacy itself came 'to be appropriated for radically different ends'.[98] Ian Miller acknowledges that rather than solely a tool of 'social control', self-esteem could be empowering, noting its prevalence as an organising framework for activist groups in the US where 'the neoliberal and emancipatory aspects of self-esteem coexisted in uneasy tension with each other'.[99] While self-esteem is often critiqued as self-indulgent, Miller demonstrates that it could support claims to 'bodily autonomy, emotional wellbeing, and personal safety'. For marginalised groups especially, therapeutic language enabled the expression of pain and the articulation of 'injuries to the self'. In this way, Miller frames therapeutic culture as 'multidimensional'.[100] Likewise, Daniel Nehring and colleagues argue that self-help was 'hybridised and acted as a source of empowerment, as well as one of social control', refuting totalising 'claims of cultural standardisation'.[101] These accounts help broaden the possible meanings and implications of self-esteem in historical perspective. They provide opportunities to explore the 'many circumstances, encounters, values, and lived experiences' of emotional norms, making possible an understanding of self-feeling as neither imposed nor freely chosen, but actively negotiated within particular historical contexts.[102]

Responses to emotional norms are not always political. As Timothy Aubry and Trysh Travis warn, the historians must not adopt an 'unthinking default to "the political" as the yardstick with which we measure value'.[103] Historians of emotion and psychology have identified the diversity and plurality of emotional and psychological cultures that exist alongside one another.[104] Metaphors of 'arena', 'communities', and 'frontiers' have all been employed to capture this plural construction of emotional categories.[105] Similarly, Erin Sullivan writes of

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[97] Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), pp.3-4.
[98] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.5.
[99] Miller, *Self-Esteem,* p.19.
[100] Ibid., p.16.
[101] Daniel Nehring, Emmanuel Alvarado, Eric C. Hendriks, and Dylan Kerrigan (eds), *Transnational Popular Psychology and the Global Self-Help Industry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.12.
[102] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.18.
[103] Aubry and Travis, *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture*, p.22.
[104] Erin Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.3.; Mathew Thomson, *Lost Freedom: The Landscape of the Child and the British Post-War Settlement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.79.
[105] Barclay, 'State of the Field', p.460.

emotional 'scripts' as well as those moments when authors went 'off script' – 'rejecting, modifying or reinterpreting received diagnoses and interpretations of sadness'.[106] Indeed, analyses of how self-esteem discourse is applied in practice have revealed discomfort, rather than political resistance, as a result. Jane Kenway and Sue Willis explore this in their analysis of Australian educators' 'unease' about the 'uncritical' application of self-esteem in schools, revealing how programmes reflecting Western assumptions could create 'quite an unpleasant experience' for Aboriginal Australian students whose cultural norms conflicted with exercises assuming universal meanings of body language and eye contact.[107] This recognition of the diversity of emotional and psychological cultures undermines totalising narratives of self-esteem and suggests the importance of attending to diverse experiences and encounters with emotional norms in time and place.

The analysis in this thesis centres encounter, negotiation, and sometimes resistance within day-to-day contexts of childrearing and education. The goal is not to dismiss the insights of 'governmentality' which presents a useful lens for understanding some of the socially-oriented ideas that underpinned self-esteem discourse, but to develop what Mathew Thomson calls 'a more variegated and therefore vigorous' understanding of psychological culture that recognises both diversity of experience, and continuing possibilities of resistance, expansion and negotiation.[108] This approach opens up important questions about whose voices and experiences tend to be excluded from accounts of self-esteem. The following section examines how the focus on expert discourse has obscured the experiences of those about whom self-esteem discourse was written – ordinary people, particularly children, who encountered and actively shaped these concepts in their everyday lives.

Experience

Having established the limitations of expert-driven narratives of self-esteem in the previous section, this analysis turns to another fundamental problem: existing histories of self-esteem rarely examine actual encounters with the concept by those for whom this discourse was intended. Those who engaged with self-esteem are often framed as gullible actors – duped by false promises of self-realisation in the commercial messaging of self-help literature. Orgad and Gill, for example, acknowledge that feminist activists 'tried to collectively improve their

[106] Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy*, p.9.; Christopher Tilmouth, review of Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England, by Erin Sullivan, Social History of Medicine 32.2 (2019), p.418.
[107] Jane Kenway and Sue Willis, *Hearts and Minds: Self-Esteem and the Schooling of Girls* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.2; p.91.
[108] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, pp.13-14.

self-esteem' but ultimately frame them as misguided victims of confidence culture that 'operates to exculpate the institutions and structures of contemporary life' by 'blam[ing] women for their difficulties or subordinate positions'.[109] This is not to deny that confidence can be part of what Orgad and Gill describe as 'the remaking of feminism along neoliberal lines', but that arguments about self-esteem as a false consciousness preclude the intentional, informed interaction with psychological constructs.[110] As Ole Jacob Madsen has argued of self-help, it 'implies on one hand an autonomous agent ("self"), and on the other hand a dependence upon other agents ("help")'.[111] Neglect of everyday encounters with self-esteem is particularly surprising given that various scholars have demonstrated the popular origins or 'folk wisdom' underlying self-esteem concepts, which were only later appropriated by experts. As noted previously, its 'common day-to-day usage' was recognised by psychologists who acknowledged its 'intuitive, common-sense' appeal.[112]

Particularly problematic accounts go beyond the neglect of everyday encounters with self-esteem and even negate the idea that injuries to self-esteem constitute genuine injuries at all, suggesting that psychological injuries are less severe than physical injuries. In an account of self-esteem in the US, John Hewitt asks whether 'a preoccupation with psychic wounding undermine[s] our capacity to tell the difference between right and wrong'.[113] Frank Furedi describes a cultural turn after the 1970s in which 'every challenge or misfortune that confronts people is represented as a direct threat to their emotional well-being'.[114] For Furedi, a cultural interest in protecting self-esteem has led to a 'pathologising' of negative emotion, creating a culture that 'unwittingly encourages people to feel traumatised and depressed by experiences hitherto regarded as routine'. Furedi calls this an 'ascendancy of feelings'.[115] Such accounts position psychology as displacing supposedly healthier forms of social organisation, with critics like Glynn Harrison offering nostalgia for an era when someone with negative self-appraisal would be advised not to 'get stuck in your own problems' or to 'think about other people', rather than being told simply to 'believe in yourself more'.[116]

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[109] Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture*, p.6.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Madsen, *Optimising the Self*, p.7.
[112] Wells and Marwell, *Self-Esteem*, p.8.
[113] Hewitt, *The Myth of Self-Esteem*, p.xii.
[114] Furedi, *Therapy Culture*, p.1.
[115] Ibid., pp.1-6.
[116] Harrison, *The Big Ego Trip*, p.16.

Historians have recently warned against assumptions that dismiss the reality of psychological constructs and emotional injury. Teri Chettiar challenges the idea that psychological influence represents 'false consciousness', pointing to how 'ideas and practices were persuasive enough to be chosen by many people' who actively engaged with and promoted psychological concepts such as intimacy.[117] Indeed, Ian Hacking's influential 'looping effect' paradigm demonstrates that people are not passive recipients of psychological categories but active participants who transform the very classifications applied to them.[118] In relation to self-esteem specifically, Ian Miller urges scholars not to eschew 'real emotional suffering by denying, or not taking seriously enough, low self-esteem as a significant modern problem'.[119]

Critical psychologists also present important perspectives that expose the dangers of employing binary assumptions about self-love and self-hatred which ultimately dehumanise psychological subjects. Richard Allen's study of Black American self-concept argues that scholars find it difficult 'to conceive of Africans as not suffering from self-hatred' and struggle to recognise 'deflecting or resistive forces within the African community'.[120] These assumptions rested on the idea that 'Africans receive their sense of self from the European American community' and would be depleted in the face of social prejudice, rather than assuming that self-worth was derived from Black communities.[121] This assumption persists in self-esteem literature. Ian Miller's account of self-esteem in the US notes sweepingly that 'low self-esteem persists as a major problem in African American communities'.[122] William Cross offers a critique of these simplistic binaries, identifying how assumptions of Black 'self-hatred' were replaced by romantic notions of pride following civil rights movements. For Cross, both interpretations prove inadequate because they 'insult Black humanity by depicting it in simplistic terms', whereas 'to be human is by definition to be complex'.[123] Cross employs W. E. B. DuBois' notion of 'double consciousness' as a more sophisticated framework which captures the complexity of navigating between competing cultural systems:

> [T]his sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever

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[117] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.10.
[118] Ian Hacking, 'Kinds of People: Moving Targets', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 151 (2007), p.306.
[119] Miller, *Self-Esteem*, p.9.
[120] Richard Allen, *Concept of Self: A Study of Black Identity and Self-Esteem* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), p.56.
[121] Ibid., p.59.
[122] Miller, *Self-Esteem*, p.18.
[123] William E. Cross, *Shades of Black: Diversity in African-American Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp.xi-xii.

> feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body.[124]

In the English context, historians have demonstrated the usefulness of ordinary experience in exposing the problems with rigid, binary social theory. As Jon Lawrence warns in his study of popular individualism in twentieth-century England, '[t]here is a danger that we pay too much attention to these powerful narratives of decline and too little attention to what ordinary people have to say about their own lives.'[125] Lawrence argues that where binary accounts of individualism focus on the death of community, we should instead focus on how community persists in alternative ways and modes which can be gleaned by attending to the testimony and experiences of 'ordinary' individuals.[126] Emily Robinson and colleagues demonstrate through the personal testimony of 'ordinary' people how individualism in Britain had 'multiple political and cultural valences' that emerged from the political left as well as the right, challenging 'class, gender and racial inequalities in sometimes surprising ways'.[127] Similarly, Mike Savage's work demonstrates how post-war working-class identities were structured around claims to 'ordinariness' which 'was used to denote authenticity, individuality, and a lack of privilege' going 'hand-in-hand with a strong ethic of individualism'.[128] Jennifer Crane's study of 'gifted' children provides another compelling example of how collective action could coincide with concern for children's individual experiences, as families acting collectively were 'key driver[s] in facilitating the ideological shifts towards "popular individualism"', rooted not in selfishness but in ideas of citizenship and community.[129] Lawrence also demonstrated the vital importance of centring ordinary experience in understanding complex social phenomena. Lawrence's analysis reveals that ordinary people sought 'a way to reconcile personal freedom […] with a deeper sense of social connection', reminding us that:

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[124] W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), cited in Allen, *Concept of Self*, p.29.
[125] Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?*, p.20.
[126] Ibid., p.19.
[127] Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, and Natalie Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories about Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the "Crisis" of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History* 28.2 (2017), p.279.
[128] Mike Savage, 'Working-Class Identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study', *Sociology* 39 (2005), p.939 cited in Robinson et al, 'Telling Stories', p.278.
[129] Jennifer Crane, 'Britain and Europe's Gifted Children in the Quests for Democracy, Welfare and Productivity, 1970-1990', *Contemporary European History* 32 (2023), pp.237-8.

> Everyday life is rich, messy, and riven with ambivalence. Unlike philosophers, most people happily live with contradictions; individualism and community may be polar opposites in social theory, but not in lives as they are actually lived.[130]

Understanding self-feeling in twentieth-century England requires embracing this complexity whilst avoiding the 'primitive modes of analysis' that reduce human experience to simplistic binaries.[131] Rather than treating mental and emotional states as less substantial than economic or political forces, we must acknowledge that they 'constitute a substantive part of social reality' that are 'public as often as they are private, collective as often as they are individual'.[132] This demands attention to the voices of ordinary people and the spaces in which they would have encountered ideas about self-feeling, alongside professional authorities, recognising resistance as well as acceptance, and engaging with the messy realities of lived experience rather than the clean logic of social theory.

I have argued that existing scholarship on self-esteem suffers from several interconnected limitations that obscure how self-feeling actually functioned in and influenced twentieth-century society. Critical perspectives frame self-esteem narrowly as symptomatic of neoliberal individualism, while governmentality-driven frameworks position it as a totalising force of social control, overlooking popular resistance and negotiation. Expert-centrism excludes the everyday encounters ordinary people may have had with ideas about self-feeling, not to mention their experiences of self-referential emotions. Finally, the scope of understanding what self-feeling was and could mean is limited by a restrictive scope that focuses singularly on post-1970s America. The rest of this thesis seeks to address these limitations by demonstrating that self-feeling was a significant and contested component of the emotional architecture of twentieth-century England, functioning not as a straightforward tool of individualisation but as what Collins and colleagues term a 'a mediator between individuals and society'.[133] Using the lens of childhood, this analysis aims to reveal that self-feeling operated as a source of anxiety and tension about the place of the self in society that reflected broader concerns about emotional vulnerability, educational purpose, and national progress. Rather than assuming expert-driven imposition, this study traces the 'rich, messy' negotiations through which psychological expertise and everyday experience intersected.[134]

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[130] Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?,* p.20.
[131] Cross, *Shades of Black*, p.ix.
[132] Aubry and Travis, *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture*, p.19.
[133] Collins et al, 'A History of Self-Esteem', p.1140.
[134] Lawrence*, Me, Me, Me?,* p.2.

The following section outlines my methodological approach and explains the rationale for focusing on England and childhood as crucial sites for understanding self-feeling's historical development and contested meanings.

1.3 Self-Feeling in England

England provides an illuminating case study for understanding the early emergence and contested nature of self-feeling discourse in the twentieth-century. Rather than accepting narratives that position self-esteem as a distinctly American phenomenon emerging in the 1970s, evidence from England reveals that self-feeling was already central to post-war negotiations of citizenship and national progress. Although many of its findings might be applicable across Britain, the majority of this thesis focuses on England. This is a decision taken to account for observed differences in education, psychological culture, and individualism in the four nations – a detailed contextualisation of which is beyond the scope of this thesis.[135]

Discourse about self-feeling in England immediately complicates standard chronologies. In 1947 – over two decades before Dorothy Corkille Briggs supposedly introduced self-esteem as an 'overarching framework' for parenting advice to an American audience – British child psychologist James Hemming was warning parents that the eleven-plus examination created a devastating 'slump' in both attainment and self-confidence among pupils. Hemming, alongside nursery expert Josephine Balls, promised to teach parents how to raise children 'for full personality and effective citizenship' in post-war England, centring their approach on children's innate 'determination to protect their self-esteem'.[136] At the same time, reception to self-feeling in the context of self-help remained ambivalent. When Norman Vincent Peale's

[135] Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?,* p.19. Jon Lawrence notes that because 'class resonated differently in England compared with the other home nations', individualism itself 'played out differently' in each of the four nations; Adrian Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind: Education and Psychology in England c.1860-c.1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.9. Wooldridge observes that Scotland's education system was "distinct from England's" in being "much more open to both the academic study of educational psychology and the meritocratic ideal"; Alan F. Collins, 'England', in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Psychology: Global Perspectives,* ed. David B. Baker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.191. Collins notes that, with the exception of London, 'developments in academic psychology were more rapid in Scotland' when compared to England.; Carol Craig, *Creating Confidence: A Handbook for Professionals Working with Young People* (Glasgow: Hay Nisbet, 2007), pp.34-41. Carol Craig has – somewhat simplistically – diagnosed Scotland with a 'proclivity to pessimism' and a 'crisis of [self-]confidence' owing to its 'egalitarian values', suggesting that an account of a nation's relationship with concepts like self-confidence can be grounded in national culture.

[136] James Hemming and Josephine Balls, *The Child is Right: A Challenge to Parents and Other Adults* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1947), pp.134-5.

The Power of Positive Thinking sold 130,000 copies in Britain by 1955, critics dismissed it as 'glucose, irrational, escapist, capitalist drivel'.[137] The prominent Methodist minister Reverend Donald Soper warned that such 'magic in the place of religion' represented dangerous individualism, evidence of a quintessentially American 'love of lessons on self-improvement'.[138] This pattern of simultaneous fascination and resistance characterised British engagement with self-feeling throughout the century. It also suggests that popular attitudes to self-feeling rested in no small part on existing specific sociocultural anxieties about self and society. Self-feeling was, to borrow a phrase from Campbell and Foster – 'hedonically ambiguous'.[139]

Intellectual culture in England – and in Britain more broadly – made it particularly receptive to self-feeling discourse. Unlike the United States, England never fully embraced behaviourism, which had marginalised subjective experiences in American psychology.[140] As Collins argues, behaviourism 'never really gained the same status in English psychology', in part because it 'contrasted markedly' with strong psychological traditions that emphasised 'the mind as active, constructive, and meaning laden'.[141] This was particularly evident in child psychology, which upheld concern with 'free will and morality' and promoted the 'belief that [child] development was in large degree about self-realisation'.[142] Simultaneously, psychoanalytic ideas circulated more freely in British intellectual culture than previously assumed. Michal Shapira demonstrates that British psychoanalysis 'had in fact been discussed considerably in different forums in Britain since the early twentieth century, often in a partially favourable manner' with the Second World War elevating 'British psychoanalysis to a role not enjoyed anywhere else in the world'.[143]

The period after 1945 proved transformative for English emotional culture, including self-feeling. Claire Langhamer identifies the 1950s as a 'point of emotional transition' – a fundamental shift that preceded later cultural changes.[144] This transition was characterised

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[137] Rev. Dr. Donald Soper, 'Magic in the Place of Religion' *Tribune*, 4th March 1955, p.5.
[138] 'Norman Vincent Peale: Obituary', *The Times*, 27th December 1993 p.15.; 'Americans' Love of Lessons on Self-Improvement', *The Times,* Wednesday 29th December 1954.
[139] Keith W. Campbell and Joshua D. Foster, 'Self-Esteem: Evolutionary Roots and Historical Cultivation', in *Self-Esteem Issues and Answers: A Sourcebook of Current Perspectives,* ed. by Michael H. Kernis (New York: Psychology Press, 2013), p.344.
[140] Adrian C. Brock, *Internationalising the History of Psychology* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p.12.; Thomson, *Psychological Subjects,* pp.272-4.
[141] Collins, 'England', pp.200-201.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Shapira, *The War Inside,* pp.20-1.; p.1.
[144] Langhamer, *The English in Love*, p.20.

simultaneously 'by rising expectations and national optimism' as well as 'critical introspection and cold war anxiety', creating what Langhamer characterises as 'complex shifts in emotional culture – perhaps even an emotional revolution'.[145] Historians have located this emotional transition in the post-war period in the context of institutional and policy changes that directly affected citizens' intimate, emotional lives. Teri Chettiar has argued that 'emotional health only became a more prominent objective during the 1950s and 1960s' as the welfare state expanded beyond eliminating poverty to include 'an emotional dimension' centred on 'preventing emotional harm.'[146] Chettiar labels the post-war period 'Britain's psychopolitical era'.[147] Indeed, this thesis observes a shift from a largely conceptual interest in self-confidence as a facet of responsible citizenship into something that – with the right tools and techniques – could be instilled in children for specific academic and social outcomes.

Crucially though, Langhamer argues that this 'revolution' was neither 'linear' nor 'straightforward' but punctuated by 'emotional fragility rather than conformist calm'.[148] In relation to self-feeling, growing interest in its promises was characterised not by enthusiasm for unlimited self-feeling but by anxiety about maintaining appropriate emotional balance. Where accounts of American self-esteem focus on promoting positive self-feeling, English discourse consistently emphasised moderation. Martin Francis identifies an 'imperative of restraint' in 1950s British political culture that existed 'in tension with self-expression'.[149] In this context, the goal was not unlimited confidence but what Chettiar's post-war reformers termed 'emotional security'.[150] This narrative of complex emotional transition in the period immediately after the Second World War provides an alternative framework to the critiques of self-esteem as part of a distinctly 1970s therapeutic culture which contrasted with what Frank Furedi describes as an earlier 'cultural script' of 'stoicism, understatement, the stiff upper lip and of fortitude'.[151]

This context suggests that rather than experiencing a straightforward, short-lived 'self-esteem movement' as scholars have described in the USA, twentieth-century England witnessed the

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[145] Ibid., pp.27-8.
[146] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.7.
[147] Ibid., pp.16-17.
[148] Langhamer, *The English in Love*, pp.27-8.
[149] Martin Francis, 'Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth: The Emotional Economy of Three Conservative Prime Ministers, 1951-1963', *Journal of British Studies* 41.3 (2002), p.359.
[150] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.7.
[151] Furedi, *Therapy Culture*, p.19.

construction of a new emotional architecture of childhood marked more by anxiety and ambivalence than by enthusiasm. Self-feeling became a crucial mediator between self and society – a means of negotiating competing demands for individual development and social cohesion rather than simply promoting narcissistic individualism. Obtaining the 'right amount' of self-esteem – and instilling it in children – became a marker of healthy successful citizenship, helping people reconcile obligations to both self and society whilst balancing personal with collective responsibility. For these reasons, self-feeling discourse was particularly focused on children, who represented both the future of the nation and the most malleable subjects for emotional intervention.[152]

1.4 Children and Self-Feeling

Having established England as a particularly complex case study for understanding self-feeling's contested nature, this section explains why focusing on children and childhood helps develop and explain some of that complexity. Children emerge as uniquely revealing subjects for examining self-feeling's cultural significance, not simply because they were the primary targets of self-esteem discourse, but because their experiences illuminate the fundamental tensions between individual development and social regulation that self-feeling was often invoked to resolve.

Despite children's central position in self-esteem discourse, they remain conspicuously absent from existing historical accounts. This neglect is particularly striking given that analyses of psychological literature reveal that 'most of the published literature' on self-esteem concerns childhood and adolescence.[153] Indeed, self-esteem became 'a widely accepted theory of education' during the twentieth century, and influential studies like Stanley Coopersmith's *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem* and Morris Rosenberg's 1965 *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image* focused specifically on young people.[154] Coopersmith's study identified three key conditions for raising confident children: 'parental warmth, clearly defined limits, and

[152] Emma Partridge, 'Feeling Confident? Marginalised Experiences of Individualism in Britain after 1968' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Sheffield, September 2018). While I argue that children were framed as the most significant targets of self-feeling discourse in the twentieth-century, I have demonstrated elsewhere that adults have also been framed as beneficiaries of self-confidence messaging, particularly in the context of grassroots activism. Feminist and gay pride movements embraced confidence-building activities and messaging in the 1960s and 1970s.
[153] Emler, *Self-Esteem*, p.1.
[154] Hewitt, *The Myth of Self-Esteem*, p.xi.; Coopersmith, *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem*.

respectful treatment'.[155] These findings led Miller and Cho to argue that Coopersmith's study effectively 'yoked self-esteem […] to the same childrearing values that American elites had been espousing for more than 100 years'.[156]

As historians of childhood recognise, efforts to foster specific emotions in children reflect 'a modern perception of the child as more malleable than an adult'.[157] Children's assumed malleability positions them frequently 'at the heart of social anxieties and debates about the future of nations and empires'.[158] The institutional context proved crucial in enabling this psychological regulation. Mathew Thomson observes that although the state did not attempt to apply psychology as a broad regulatory tool over adults, children were subject to 'fundamentally different' treatment. There was a sense of 'responsibility' to attend to their psychological needs, while 'it was not yet their right to resist'.[159] The arrival of a universal system of education in the post-war period presented 'a unique opportunity to reach out at a formative stage to a cross-section of the population as a whole.'[160] This institutional framework enabled what Michal Shapira treats as 'two separate but interconnected phenomena' in post-war Britain: 'the psychologisation of the self and the child'.[161]

This thesis sets out to show that these two developments were rarely separate. Children became central figures in an unprecedented expansion of emotional education from the nineteenth century onwards, with experts increasingly emphasising that children were 'in no respect capable of bringing [their] feelings under control without external assistance'.[162] As Pascal Eitler observes of childhood emotion after the late nineteenth century, children simultaneously became 'objects of emotional training and optimisation, and, at the same time, subjects of emotional self-development', reflecting the complex ways self-feeling operated both as external imposition and personal aspiration.[163]

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[155] Coopersmith, *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem*, p.236.
[156] Peggy J. Miller and Grace E. Cho. *Self-Esteem in Time and Place: How American Families Imagine, Enact, and Personalise a Cultural Ideal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.12.
[157] Stephanie Olsen, *Childhood, Youth and Emotions in Modern History: National, Colonial and Global Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.3.
[158] Karen Vallgårda, Kristine Alexander and Stephanie Olsen, 'Emotions and the Global Politics of Childhood', in *Childhood, Youth and Emotions in Modern History: National, Colonial and Global Perspectives* ed. Stephanie Olsen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.12.
[159] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.110.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Shapira, *The War Inside*, pp.3-4.
[162] Olsen, *Childhood, Youth and Emotions*, pp.2-3.
[163] Pascal Eitler, Stephanie Olsen and Uffa Jensen, 'Introduction' in *Learning How to Feel: Children's Literature and Emotional Socialisation, 1870-1970* ed. by Ute Frevert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.2.

Childhood as Cultural Battleground

Like emotions and psychology, childhood is historically and culturally contingent rather than a fixed biological category. Age-based classification 'has its own history', demanding analytical scrutiny as a concept that shifts according to cultural priorities and adult interests.[164] Historians have mapped how adult populations developed vested interests in creating 'normal' healthy children for national economic and political purposes, particularly regarding 'the significance of children as future citizens'.[165] Significantly for this thesis, children occupied a central position as sites of profound social anxiety throughout twentieth-century England, reflecting broader concerns about democracy, citizenship, and national wellbeing. Harry Hendrick identifies key 'dichotomies or oppositions' influencing twentieth-century policymaking: 'an emphasis on either the bodies or the minds of children' which framed children either 'as victim or threat' or 'normal or abnormal.' In Hendrick's narrative, from the mid-century, focus shifted 'from the bodies to the minds and emotions of children', prompted by experiences of war and evacuation.[166]

The emergence of psychological expertise sustained childhood's transition to a site of anxiety, as 'psy disciplines' became central to conceptualising modern childhood.[167] Psychoanalysis in particular 'targeted the child's psyche as a site for expert knowledge' and, as Michal Shapira argues, sought to understand 'the underlying emotional mechanisms that led to violence, so as to advance human well-being in ways that could secure the future of democracy.'[168] This positioned children simultaneously as 'vulnerable and in need of protection' and as 'anxious, aggressive subjects requiring control', reflecting cultural anxieties about managing both individual development and collective social order.[169]

Considerations about self-feeling became integral to constructions of what it meant to be a child in this period. Psychological theories about child development fundamentally reshaped understandings of 'normal' childhood through concepts such as 'egotism', creating a cultural 'image of the extroverted and energetic normal child' that valued particular emotional

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[164] Laura Tisdall, 'State of the Field: The Modern History of Childhood', *History* 107.378 (2022), p.951.
[165] Leticia Fernández-Fontech, *Childhood, Pain and Emotion: A Modern British Medical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), pp.8-9.
[166] H. Hendrick, *Child Welfare: Historical Dimensions, Contemporary Debate* (Bristol, 2003), esp. pp. 1–18 cited in Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995), p.205.
[167] Tisdall, 'State of the Field', p.950.
[168] Shapira, *The War Inside,* p.2.
[169] Ibid., p.1.

dispositions whilst pathologising others.[170] Laura Tisdall demonstrates that these definitions of childhood psychology created a 'revised image of junior-aged children' that simultaneously emphasised 'how children should be and stated what they could not be'.[171] Ideas about self-centred childhood are reconstructed in critical accounts of self-esteem, in the generalised, pejorative assertions about an impending 'generation of narcissists' or Twenge's 'generation me'.[172] This thesis centres how ideas about balanced self-feeling – the avoidance of both deficit and excess of self-esteem – underpinned shifting ideas about childhood in the twentieth century in England.

Ideas about childhood self-feeling intersected with other social categories including class, gender, race and disability. As Tisdall observes, 'the white, male, able-bodied, middle-class and implicitly heterosexual and cisgendered child is often the "invisible norm" in scholarship', and this kind of normativity fundamentally shaped how emotional norms were constructed and applied to different children. As Karen Vallgårda and colleagues demonstrate that despite universalising impulses, these emotional formations 'could not completely trump hierarchies of race, class and gender', meaning that whilst 'childhood was ostensibly a category defined solely by age, in various global contexts it was nevertheless fractured by class, gender, religion and race.'[173] Indeed, Tisdall observes that 'female, ethnic minority, working-class and disabled pupils suffered most' from child-centred standards of healthy childhood.[174] Through these intersections, self-feeling functioned as a prism through which anxieties about individual and social difference were refracted and managed.

Children as Complex Negotiators

Any historical analysis of self-feeling and childhood must avoid reproducing top-down governance models by assuming children were simply passive recipients of adult emotional management, their histories framed 'only important insofar as they affect adult histories'.[175] Such assumptions risk reducing children to mere 'objects of socialisation' rather than recognising them as 'forces of socialisation' in their own right.[176]

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[170] Laura Tisdall, *A Progressive Education? How Childhood Changed in Mid-Twentieth Century English Schools* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp.142-4.
[171] Ibid., pp.141-2.
[172] Storr, *Selfie*, p.227.; Twenge, 'The Evidence for Generation Me', p.11.
[173] Vallgårda et al, 'Emotions and the Global Politics of Childhood', p.19.
[174] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?,* p.237.
[175] Tisdall, 'State of the Field', p.955.
[176] Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago, 2005), p.xv, cited in Tisdall 'State of the Field', p.955.

The history of emotions provides useful analytical frameworks for understanding how children encountered and negotiated imposed emotional constructs. Alexander, Olsen, and Vallgårda's concepts of 'emotional formations' and 'emotional frontiers' prove particularly valuable. Emotional formations represent spaces where children are socialised into emotional norms through processes involving 'varying degrees of intentionality' as adults seek to cultivate 'particular sensibilities and habits of feeling' aligned with specific 'moral standards and relationships of power'.[177] Subsequently, children frequently find themselves 'at an emotional frontier', positioned 'between expectations stemming from contrasting emotional formations', navigating competing emotional expectations that often contradicted their earlier socialisation.[178]

Children's responses to and encounters with self-feeling discourse cannot be reduced to simple passive acceptance or hostile rejection. While some children 'probably more or less consciously learned to navigate the different sets of emotional expectations', others were left feeling 'disjointed, torn, inadequate, confused or alienated.' Rob Boddice terms this experience 'emotional crisis' to describe this task of complex navigation.[179] These frontier experiences, however, also possess transformative potential, enabling children to 'denaturalise certain ingrained types of feeling and practice' and recognise 'the contingency of the variegated emotional codes of different sets of adults.' This 'authenticity exposure' could act as 'a forceful mode of social critique', enabling children to question and challenge imposed emotional norms.[180] But value should not be placed solely on resistance. This thesis acknowledges Laura Tisdall's important observation that children could exercise agency through 'collaboration with norms' or through 'employ[ing] more subtle strategies of negotiation and alliance with adults or peers', as well as their 'willing performance of childhood' which positions them as producers of the socially-accepted conceptual framework of childhood.[181]

Self-feeling discourse shaped both the institutions children encountered daily and their worldviews, operating not simply as external imposition but as a framework children themselves employed, resisted, and transformed. Children also employed self-feeling

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[177] Vallgårda et al, 'Emotions and the Global Politics of Childhood', p.21.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Rob Boddice, 'Affective Turn', pp.158-162, cited in Vallgårda et al, 'Emotions and the Global Politics of Childhood', p.25.
[180] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, cited in Vallgårda et al, 'Emotions and the Global Politics of Childhood', pp.25-6.
[181] Tisdall, 'State of the Field', p.957.

discourse as a means of understanding and critiquing social arrangements. Studies of state education in the post-war period found that pupils in lower streams defined those in higher streams in terms of arrogance and inflated egos, whilst streaming itself was sometimes perceived as personal psychological injury.[182] Self-feeling became a way of understanding and responding to social order, illustrating how emotional norms around self-confidence became mechanisms through which social hierarchies were both maintained and challenged.

In twentieth-century England, concerns about children's self-feeling often served as proxies for broader social fears about individualism, social cohesion, and national character. In various ways, efforts to manage children's self-feeling to produce 'healthy' levels of self-regard created and reinforced limiting ideas about children and childhood, although self-feeling could also be framed as a means of harnessing personal success and collective empowerment. In the narrative that follows, children emerge not as passive recipients or simple resisters, but as complex negotiators who participated actively in constructing, modifying, and sometimes resisting emotional frameworks designed to regulate and define their development. This perspective reveals how self-feeling operated not simply as a psychological concept applied to children, but as part of broader emotional formations that children navigated with varying degrees of willing compliance, resistance, and creative adaptation. Understanding children as sites of anxiety, objects of emotional regulation, and complex negotiators reveals how twentieth-century Britain struggled to reconcile competing demands for individual self-realisation and social cohesion. This approach provides the foundation for examining self-feeling's development across a broad chronological, geographical, and linguistic scope that captures these complex negotiations in their full historical context.

1.5 Case Studies, Chronology & Language

As an explorative study of the history of self-feeling in England, this thesis employs breadth to its advantage. It analyses wide-ranging and diverse case studies, covers an expansive time period from the period between the two world wars up until the 1980s, and consciously casts a wide net in the language of self-feeling, which covers a range of self-referential emotions including self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-assuredness. This methodological choice

[182] David H. Hargreaves, *Social Relations in a Secondary School* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p.63.

proves essential for understanding self-feeling's development in the twentieth-century because the concept operated simultaneously across multiple spheres of experience, evolved through subtle shifts over extended time periods, and manifested through diverse and often overlapping terminologies that reflected changing cultural priorities. The 'hedonically ambiguous' nature of self-feeling identified earlier demands an approach that can capture both its institutional embedding and grassroots negotiation, its continuities alongside moments of transformation, and its function as a flexible mediator between individual and social concerns rather than a fixed psychological construct. Only by embracing this breadth does the thesis reveal how children's encounters with self-feeling discourse were shaped by the complex interplay between expert knowledge, popular culture, policy implementation, and everyday resistance that characterised a distinctive emotional culture.

This thesis examines self-feeling through four interconnected case studies that reflect the diverse contexts in which children and young people encountered discourse about their feelings towards themselves. They also reflect the diversity of children who encountered ideas about their self-feelings, from young children of mothers exposed to interwar, psychoanalysis-infused parenting advice to the eleven-year-olds preparing to sit their eleven plus examinations, to dissatisfied adolescents protesting against the quality and nature of the education in 1970s Britain. The case studies were selected under the assumption that not all children were subject to the same ideas about their self-feeling. By contrasting discourses of self-feeling directed at disabled children and immigrant children, as well as those – implicitly male, able-bodied, middle-class – children deemed 'normal', important intersections of self-feeling emerge in the narrative.

The first case study centres on the 'inferiority complex', focusing on childrearing advice, tracing how expert and popular guidance directed at mothers evolved from concerns about negative self-perceptions in the interwar period. Focusing on the period before 1939, the source material reflects the conceptual origins of popular interest in psychological explanations of self-feeling. The 'inferiority complex' became a known spectre to avoid in healthy childrearing, even while the specific means of avoiding it remained elusive and contested. The second case study moves to the sphere of education. It examines education policy, particularly influential Board of Education Consultative Committee reports, which Adrian Wooldridge argues 'assumed the status of official manifestos and textbooks' and provided educational psychologists 'a unique opportunity' to shape professional thinking

about children's emotional development.[183] Here, early concerns about self-feeling entered increasingly holistic education policy discussions, particularly after the Second World War when the psychological costs and benefits of selection and streaming constituted a common – if contentious – thread in debates on education. The third case study complements the focus on mainstream education by examining some more practical attempts at cultivating self-esteem in children in grassroots education initiatives, recognising that most studies focus narrowly on institutional contexts whilst neglecting creative interventions by teachers, community groups, and educational reformers working outside official channels. This also addresses Laura Tisdall's warning that policy 'not tightly controlled from the centre' rarely mapped neatly onto classroom practice.[184] The final case study of children's own education-oriented activism examines how young people themselves engaged with and challenged prevailing ideas about self-worth and emotional development.

These case studies capture what Collins describes as the need to move beyond 'histories of academic psychology' to encompass a fuller scope of psychological thinking in the twentieth century.[185] The approach draws inspiration from Mathew Thomson's use of breadth, which 'brings together high and low psychological cultures, and something in between the two'.[186] Indeed, the diversity of sources reflects the need to explore 'vectors from below' – the popular, grassroots movements and everyday practices that shaped psychological thinking alongside expert discourse.[187] This acknowledges Michal Shapira's observation that 'psychoanalysis was not only high theory; it also had very real implications for public debate and social policy', whilst recognising Thomson's insight that this pluralisation of psychological discourse was not always straightforward: 'psychological populists' often demonstrated 'suspicion of the expert and resistance to a supposedly dominant psychology'.[188]

This thesis also adopts an extensive chronological scope, spanning from the 1910s until the late 1980s, in order to capture tentative origins of self-feeling in early childrearing advice, through to more assertive declarations about the benefits of instilling self-esteem in children during childhood. The decision to begin analysis in the 1920s and 1930s interwar period

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[183] Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, p.249.
[184] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, pp.15-6.
[185] Collins, 'England', p.183.
[186] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.1.
[187] Collins, 'England', p.201.
[188] Shapira, *The War Inside*, p.5.; Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.8.

reflects the particular significance of popular psychology and psychoanalysis in Britain during this period. This era witnessed concerns about the so-called 'inferiority complex' and its potentially damaging effects on children, establishing psychological frameworks foundational for later self-esteem thinking. As Angela Davis notes, historians have 'over-generalised' the post-war period after 1945, neglecting that 'many of the social changes believed to have occurred after the war had already commenced beforehand', suggesting a need to recognise continuity as well as disjuncture.[189]

Alongside continuity in interest about the self-feeling of children, the post-war period after 1945 witnessed significant emotional transition in cultural life. Langhamer argues that 'there were fundamental changes in how selfhood was presented and understood after 1945'.[190] Shapira emphasises that 'the war proved a decisive moment for the history of psychoanalysis' as professionals addressed the psychological needs of a post-wartime population, producing 'new expectations for selfhood, citizenship, mental health, and the emergent social democracy' which proved central to the institutionalisation of self-feeling in education and childcare.[191] As Chettiar demonstrates, post-war welfare policy was explicitly designed around protecting children's emotional health, with British policymakers concerned about 'the developmental fates of the many children who had recently (even if only temporarily) lost the security of a two-parent family home'.[192] Indeed, the case studies reflecting movements and initiatives in the 1960s and 1970s reflect more practical and pedagogical interventions in the self-feeling of children than are evident in the earlier half of the century.

From the late 1960s, self-feeling discourse was both pluralised and contested, and this period warrants particular attention. Thomson identifies this decade as marking the breakdown of the 'social, economic, and ideological settlement forged out of the experience of war', creating space for competing visions of childhood, education, and emotional development.[193] By this time, self-concept discourse spanned the political spectrum, invoked both in critiques of competitive individualism and attacks on 'progressive' education. This contestation arguably represents the peak of British interest in self-esteem. The endpoint of the thesis is the late 1980s, by which point discourse about self-feeling was firmly embedded in discourse

[189] Angela Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England, 1945-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p.1.
[190] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, p.9.
[191] Shapira, *The War Inside*, p.1.
[192] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.3.
[193] Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, p.10.

about children and their education. After the late 1980s, self-esteem became blended with the growing 'positive psychology' movement – a distinct phenomenon that has already garnered significant scholarly interest.[194] Collins and colleagues note that whilst self-esteem 'was firmly embedded in the vocabulary of academic psychology' in the 1980s, by the last decade of the century, 'enthusiasm for self-esteem' as an isolated concept was fading amongst academic psychologists.[195]

A final dimension of breadth involves employing the umbrella term 'self-feeling' to encompass the diverse range of labels attached to self-oriented emotions throughout the twentieth century. This reflects Mathew Thomson's warning against 'projecting back our own view of what constituted psychological modernity' and instead seeking to understand 'the types of psychological thinking that were available' in specific historical contexts.[196] This flexibility allows movement between various contemporary labels, including 'inferiority' which dominated interwar discourse, 'self-confidence' emerging in mid-century educational thinking, and 'self-esteem' which captured academic attention by the late 1960s.

This breadth is methodologically essential given the linguistic complexity surrounding self-oriented emotions. Wells and Marwell identified wide-ranging nomenclature associated with self-esteem concepts, noting that the same term might be used differently among theorists whilst various names might apply to the same concept, including

> Self-love, self-confidence, self-respect, self-acceptance, self-satisfaction, self-evaluation, self-appraisal, self-worth, sense of adequacy or personal efficacy, sense of competence, self-ideal congruence, ego or ego-strength.[197]

All reflect what John Hewitt calls 'self-referential emotions' and connote 'some basic process of psychological functioning' which Wells and Marwell describe 'as either self-evaluation or self-affection or as some combination of the two.'[198]

Some scholars argue for greater precision in distinguishing these concepts. Ole Jacob Madsen warns against 'confusing self-esteem with self-confidence', suggesting 'self-confidence' belongs to an earlier, more socially-oriented era 'where one was judged according to the

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[194] For example Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens* and Barbara Ehrenreich, *Smile or Die*.
[195] Collins et al, 'A History of Self-Esteem', p.1118.
[196] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.1.
[197] Wells and Marwell, *Self-Esteem*, pp.6-7.
[198] Hewitt, *The Myth of Self-Esteem*, p.125.; Wells and Marwell, *Self-Esteem*, pp.6-7.

results one achieved', whereas 'self-esteem' represents 'an internal standard of emotional wellbeing, which to a far lesser degree depends upon external factors.'[199] However, this distinction risks imposing artificial boundaries that contemporaries themselves did not always observe. The thesis embraces linguistic fluidity precisely because it reveals how self-feeling functioned as what Richards and Stenner describe as 'a sort of internal reflection of the outside world', where psychological language served as 'a psychological technique for both talking about other psychological phenomena and for giving them form and meaning'.[200]

With a broad, exploratory study come several limitations. Finding self-feeling in the archive is possible, but not a straightforward task. For most organisations, it constitutes a secondary or even tertiary goal rather than a defining characteristic worth recording in organisational titles or archived catalogues. The case studies selected represent a diverse range of environments and experiences in which children encountered self-feeling, but by no means represent a full picture.

Firstly, each case study is informed by written source material. Following Monique Scheer's understanding of emotion as 'practice' located at the 'nexus of doings and sayings', a fuller account would incorporate facial expressions, gestures, and social rituals alongside textual evidence. Like most historians of emotion, this study relies primarily on written sources – including parenting advice manuals, memoirs, policy documents, and children's creative writing – whilst recognising such texts contain evidence of experiential emotional 'work'.[201]

Next, following self-feeling in the archive led me primarily to organisations based in large cities with infrastructures designed around providing for a high concentration of children in urban settings. London features heavily, and is complemented by source material from Bristol, Sheffield, and Manchester, amongst other urban centres. Only the play-based and outdoor education grassroots organisations go some way to providing a more rural picture of how self-feeling was understood and prescribed for children, revealing a strong conceptual relationship between environment and self-concept that could benefit from further analysis and development. Although references to Scotland and Wales are made, national comparisons

[199] Madsen, *Optimising the Self*, p.112.
[200] Richards and Stenner, *Putting Psychology in its Place*, p.8.
[201] Monique Scheer, 'Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieulian Approach to Understanding Emotion', *History and Theory* 51.2 (2012), p.200, cited in Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy*, p.7.

of self-feeling between the nations of Britain and further afield are similarly beyond the scope of this thesis.

Finally, the inevitable disjuncture between prescriptive literature and lived experience represents another limitation. As Lucy Noakes observes, 'emotional codes, while being powerful social forces, are always and everywhere negotiated, mediated and contested'.[202] To capture a diversity of engagements and encounters with self-feeling discourse, this thesis focuses on those who engaged actively with self-feeling discourse rather than what Thomson calls the 'silent majority' who 'had little developed or active everyday interest in psychological ideas', but who likely 'met the language and assumptions of psychology on a regular basis'.[203]

1.6 Thesis Structure

Having established the methodological framework for examining self-feeling across diverse sources, contexts, and timeframes, this section outlines how the thesis applies this broad approach across four substantive chapters that trace applications of self-feeling from the interwar period to the late 1980s. Each chapter examines a different area wherein self-feeling was prominent in shaping ideas about children and their emotional development and wellbeing. Each represents an emotional formation of self-feeling, often applied to balance and make healthy the relationship between the individual child and their social responsibility and potential. Each also represented a possible emotional frontier which children – particularly working-class, non-academic, disabled, and children of ethnic minority backgrounds – had to navigate.

Chapter Two expands on the relatively narrow scope of histories of self-esteem by identifying an early moment of popular enthusiasm about self-feeling. It explores how practitioners in education and childrearing employed ideas about children's self-feeling to set out new, psychologically-informed visions of schooling and parenting. In these contexts, self-feeling was an intuitive framework for translating ideas from psychoanalysis into the everyday lives of children. Focusing on early childhood, it demonstrates how self-feeling informed new understandings of what children were like. They were simultaneously framed as inherently

[202] Lucy Noakes, *Dying for the Nation: Death, Grief and Bereavement in Second World War Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p.52.
[203] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.4.

egotistical and as uniquely vulnerable to inferiority-feeling. While a degree of 'natural' egotism was permitted, parents were instructed by childrearing experts to protect their children from the inferiority complex. Adult caregivers were framed as architects of healthy self-regard and tasked with providing the right conditions, and developing the correct psychological expertise to provide psychological protection. Despite some resistance to the new 'queer jargon', the prevalence of the inferiority complex concept heralded a new common sense of self-feeling.

Chapter Three focuses on the growing attention to emotional and social development in education policy debate and discourse in the twentieth-century. Taking a long view from the 1920s until the 1970s, it reveals that concern about children's self-feeling increasingly acted as legitimate grounds for policy development and implementation. It focuses particularly on discourse regarding early adolescence, understood as a time of heightened social awareness and therefore self-consciousness. Concern about the damaging psychological impact of social comparison, especially for children deemed 'backward', would resonate in debates about educational streaming and selection practices for half a century. On one hand, proponents of selection invoked self-consciousness as justification for separate schools and streams. In this narrative, less academic children needed psychological protection from damaging comparisons and could find different routes to self-esteem. On the other hand, progressive educators and advocates for comprehensive reform used the same ideas about social comparison to highlight the failures of tripartite education to establish genuine equality in provision. Damage to children's self-esteem was cited both as a failure of the system and, by more experimental educational psychologists, a possible therapeutic route to addressing gaps in attainment. In this period, self-feeling became a powerful if malleable rhetorical framework to outline competing visions of educational purpose and success.

Chapter Four explores how self-feeling discourse emerged within alternative educational contexts from the 1960s onwards, examining three diverse grassroots initiatives that incorporated self-feeling into their pedagogical approaches as part of broader social and educational critiques. Although disparate in their aims, the playgroups movement, outdoor education camps, and workshops for disabled school leavers, each mobilised self-feeling to construct progressive educational interventions for children and young people. The movements all implicitly constructed an ideal of the healthy child, characterised by a healthy self-regard and capacity for independence. Although compassionate in their outlooks, the case studies reveal the sometimes exclusionary dimensions of self-esteem discourse,

particularly with regard to disabled children. The chapter draws attention to the tensions between self-esteem's democratic promise of universal emotional flourishing and its practical deployment in ways that often reinforced existing social distinctions.

Chapter Five examines two movements wherein children mobilised self-feeling discourse for political and emancipatory ends. In school student unions and the Black supplementary schools movement, self-feeling was central to youth activism. It was used a framework through which to understand the shortcomings and contradictions of mainstream education. Authoritarianism in schools, systematic discrimination, and a sense of voicelessness clashed with growing pressure on children to be happy and self-confident. Using ideas about self-feeling, children and intergenerational activist networks developed critiques of school and society, articulated through creative self-expression to rally their peers and campaign for change. The two movements developed their own visions of self-feeling rooted in innate worth and self-acceptance and challenged key assumptions about individual agency, social belonging, and emotional wellbeing. The chapter demonstrates that self-feeling could be a politicising framework and could fundamentally contribute meaningfully to collective action.

The thesis concludes by considering some implications of the more expansive, more complicated history of self-feeling presented here. On one hand it upholds challenges to the assumption that positive self-feeling is a universal, self-evident good, revealing that this assumption has not always, and perhaps not regularly, been widely held. On the other hand, it problematises the idea that cultural preoccupation with self-feeling is necessarily the route to social atomisation and individualisation. Self-feeling can be a route and a tool of political mobilisation and social change, if fostered and conceptualised in consultation and collaboration with those it purports to benefit.

2. Criminals Made in Nurseries: Self-Feeling, Emotional Vulnerability, and the New Psychology of Childhood in Interwar England

Children's feelings about themselves increasingly occupied the concern of progressive educators and childrearing experts in interwar England. Ideas about self-feeling – particularly the notion of 'inferiority' – were attached to emerging public anxieties about society and the nation. This chapter situates growing popular interest in self-feeling within the broader context of interwar progressive impulses in education and childrearing. The period witnessed unprecedented concern about children's emotional lives and their status as future citizens. Teri Chettiar notes a shift in concerns surrounding children's physical wellbeing as future workers, towards concern about 'the emotionally priceless child-student'.[1] After the First World War, with the decline of child labour and rising standards of living, parents increasingly viewed their children as objects of 'emotional gratification' rather than economic assets.[2] With this, childhood and childrearing in the twentieth century became 'the key area of consolidation for psychology as science and practice'.[3] Children were increasingly viewed as both symbols of democratic hope and sites of emotional risk, positioning their inner lives as matters of urgent public concern. Harry Hendrick describes how psychoanalysis influenced parenting advice by privileging 'individual will, emotions and passions' in childrearing and giving greater credence to the 'pleasures' of childhood. This prompted interest among child psychologists in play, autonomy, and exploration, while reframing poor behaviour as indicative of 'emotional dilemmas' rather than moral failings.[4] The growing prominence of psychoanalysis, particularly Sigmund Freud's depictions of the child 'as the "father of the man"' also fuelled anxieties about the relationship between children's psychological development and future problems of criminality and delinquency.[5] In this context, parents and teachers increasingly encountered psychological insights about how to educate and raise

[1] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.11.
[2] Shapira *The War Inside*, p.6.
[3] Collins, 'England', p.198.
[4] Harry Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English Society, 1880-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.28-30.
[5] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.11.

emotionally stable citizens. David Cowan identifies rising living standards as enhancing parents' ability both to purchase and find time to read parenting advice literature, while social change supported a transition from traditional, family-led advice and practice towards expert advice written and spoken about in the mass media.[6] Meanwhile, the work of progressive educators and psychoanalysts was also disseminated widely, notably by figures like Susan Isaacs who worked to translate 'the complex concepts of psychoanalysis' to a popular audience in Britain.[7]

This chapter argues that self-feeling was an important way in which psychology and psychoanalysis informed ideas about education and childrearing in interwar England. Self-feeling became increasingly linked to problems of individual success, failure, and adjustment, as well as to broader social outcomes, where it was connected to notions of anarchy, democracy, and moral development. Ideas about the unconscious self quickly supplanted what Roy Baumeister calls 'Victorian repressiveness', which had encouraged 'self-deception' over 'self-knowledge'.[8] In this new framework, the home, school, and social environment all became important contexts for understanding healthy emotional development, while children themselves were increasingly seen as emotional problems requiring careful management and intervention. Growing interest in self-feeling felt distinctly modern to contemporary observers and was a key feature of many progressive impulses under the banners of 'new education' and 'new psychology' characteristic of the interwar period. Attention to self-feeling helped establish a rhetorical departure from seemingly outdated, traditional approaches while looking toward a new future in which citizens needed the right kind of self-feeling to meet the challenges of a changing world.

The analysis that follows draws on educational reports, childrearing manuals, and progressive pedagogical literature to explore how self-feeling was imagined and debated in interwar England. As the chapter demonstrates, interest in self-feeling was not reflected in any consensus about how it was understood or acted upon. Progressive educators and childrearing authors were sometimes polarised in their ideas, particularly regarding children's natural propensity for self-feeling, and ascertaining whether authors engaged significantly with one another on these issues was beyond the scope of this chapter. Other commentators expressed

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[6] David Cowan, '"Modern" Parenting and the Uses of Childcare Advice in Post-War England', *Social History* 43.3 (2018), p.334.
[7] Michal Shapira, '"Speaking Kleinian": Susan Isaacs as Ursula Wise and the Inter-War Popularisation of Psychoanalysis', *Medical History* 61.4 (2017), p.525.
[8] Baumeister, 'How the Self Became a Problem', p.166.

outright ridicule, linking ideas about self-feeling to broader critiques of psychoanalysis, although historians have highlighted that psychoanalysis was more popular and 'widely debated' in Britain than previously understood.[9] In the absence of clearly defined practices surrounding self-feeling, the focus here is on theoretical approaches to self-feeling which fuelled significant interest in the emotional lives of children, but should not be mistaken for practice. As David Cowan's analysis of post-war parenting highlights, working-class families often adapted expert advice to suit their own circumstances rather than following it uncritically.[10]

Nevertheless, self-feeling infiltrated discourse about a diverse range of issues related to children and childhood: their development, the importance of creative expression in schools, their behaviour, and their attainment. It also introduced new roles for adults as emotional guardians of their children's self-concepts. This attention appeared in both fringe and mainstream accounts, including policy discourse, representing an early moment of popular interest in self-feeling that predated the more widely-studied 'self-esteem movement' of the 1980s by several decades. While self-feeling was by no means the primary concern of new educationalists and psychologists, it served as an important vehicle through which psychoanalytical ideas could infiltrate and inform constructions of children and childhood. In this way, the emerging problem of self-feeling forms part of the larger story by which the self 'became a psychological entity' in the twentieth century, marking a crucial transition in how modern societies came to understand the relationship between individual psychological development and collective social welfare.[11]

2.1 Self-Feeling and the 'New Education'

This section explores self-feeling in the emergence of a 'new education' in interwar England. In this period, education and child study – alongside industry and medicine – represented key sites of the application of psychological theory. Indeed, Nikolas Rose has argued that psychology itself was 'made possible' by application to a range of national demands in this period.[12] In visions of a 'new education', attention was increasingly paid to children's

[9] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.109.; Shapira, '"Speaking Kleinian"', p.526.
[10] Cowan, '"Modern" Parenting', p.346.
[11] Collins, 'England', p.201.
[12] Nikolas Rose, *The Psychological Complex: Psychology, Politics and Society in England, 1869-1939* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p.3.

emotional development, and their sense of self became framed as a problem of democracy and national progress. An education attentive to the emotional lives of children offered an alternative, progressive vision of education that prioritised individual self-realisation over standardised assessment and regulation. Through new education, psychologically-informed ideas about children's self-feeling emerged in the interwar period as an increasingly important problem to attend to and manage.

Existing scholarship on the intersection of psychology and childhood in this period has predominantly focused on mental testing and child guidance as instruments of social regulation. Historians have emphasised how psychological expertise served as mechanisms of classification and control, particularly through intelligence testing driven by concerns about 'national efficiency' rather than individual wellbeing.[13] However, the emergence of new ideas about education reveal more theoretically progressive applications of psychological knowledge that sought to transform rather than merely regulate educational practice.[14]

'New education' represented a heterogenous yet influential movement that coalesced around democratic values and progressive pedagogy in interwar Britain. As Mathew Thomson observes, this period witnessed distinctive 'openness to new ideas in education', facilitated in part by greater experimental freedom within independent schools and broader cultural currents associated with early twentieth-century utopianism.[15] At its heart, argues Thomson, was a conviction that 'a new education was the key to a new era'.[16] This vision was often more rhetorical than practical. Laura Tisdall argues that the progressive-traditional dichotomy put forward by advocates of a 'new education' was a 'straw man', while R. J. W. Selleck observed in an early history of progressive education, that progressives shared an 'uncertainty about ends' by which to realise their ideas.[17]

The movement encompassed diverse actors, including pedagogues, philosophers and psychoanalysts, who found common ground through initiatives such as the New Education Fellowship in the 1920s. Key figures including Edmond Holmes and Susan Isaacs promoted alternative educational philosophies that challenged what they perceived to be traditional, authoritarian approaches, whilst official recognition emerged through government reports and

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[13] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.109.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., p.118.
[16] Ibid., p.120.
[17] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, pp.28-9.; R. J. W. Selleck, *English Primary Education and the Progressives, 1914-1939* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p.125.

within the Board of Education itself.[18] New educationalists varied in their approaches and varying degrees of utopian ambition.[19] As Selleck observes, 'they were often as eager to criticise each other as to condemn the traditional educationists'.[20] Nevertheless, Hestor Barron argues that by the 1930s this child-centred pedagogy had achieved the status of 'intellectual orthodoxy' in schools and teacher-training colleges, marking a significant shift towards recognising the 'emotional development' of the 'individual child' as the primary focus of educational concern.[21]

Within teacher training colleges, Alan Collins observes that the influence of psychology on the training of teachers was 'much strengthened' after the First World War.[22] Mathew Thomson uses surveys of teachers in the 1930s to document some scepticism among teachers about psychological theory as a useful framework for teachers, but notes that these reservations were offset by 'a common series of perceived benefits'.[23] Where teachers found 'abstract psychology' and mental testing unconvincing, Thomson describes enthusiasm around psychological theories that could support day-to-day classroom life, particularly those that helped 'humanise and individualise education' by balancing approaches to 'freedom' and 'discipline'.[24] As testament to the prevalence of progressive ideas in education in the interwar period, Thomson accounts for the decline in membership of groups attached to specific theorists like Froebel and Montessori with the fact that many of their ideas had been integrated as 'part of the mainstream of educational theory and even to some extent practice'.[25]

Despite its intellectual influence, the practical implementation of a new education was constrained by structural limitations. While progressive ideals gradually infiltrated mainstream educational discourse, their translation into classroom practice was limited by what Thomson describes as the 'economic and conventionally academic straitjacket of state education'.[26] Nevertheless, ideas about new education constituted a popular interest in self-

[18] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, p.26.
[19] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, p.29.; p.3. Tisdall distinguishes 'utopian' progressivism from 'non-utopian' or 'child-centred' progressivism. The former is centred on notions of the freedom and self-governance of the child, while the latter was rooted in pre-determined notions of 'healthy' development, determined by the requirements of citizenship, and facilitated by adult figures.
[20] Selleck, *English Primary Education*, p.23.
[21] Hestor Barron, *The Social World of the School: Education and Community in Interwar London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), p.3.
[22] Collins, 'England', p.200.
[23] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.130.
[24] Ibid., p.132.
[25] Ibid., p.118.
[26] Ibid., p.110.

feeling and emotional development. They established new frameworks for understanding childhood that would generate both progressive possibilities and fresh anxieties about the consequences of emotional mismanagement, shaping debates about education, psychology, and the cultivation of future citizens.

What many proponents of a new education shared was a focus on children's emotional development and their capacity for self-realisation.[27] As Selleck notes in an early history of progressive education, 'the importance of the "inner self" constantly recurs in the writings of the progressives'.[28] Because of this, advocates for a new education rejected behaviourist approaches in favour of more spiritually and psychoanalytically informed theories of mind and self.[29] Inspired by influential educational theorists including Maria Montessori and Friedrich Froebel whose work posited 'unity of self and nature through education', practitioners emphasised self-realisation as the cornerstone of educational practice.[30]

The vision of a new education centred on self-realisation was set out by educationalist and author Edmond Holmes. In 1911, the former Chief Inspector of Elementary Schools published an influential tract on education, titled *What Is and What Might Be.* The severity of Holmes' critique of the elementary school system, combined with his renown as Chief Inspector ensured the work had 'astonishing impact'. By 1917, the book was on its eighth impression.[31] The work became a foundational text for English progressive ideas about education. In it, Holmes brought together his knowledge of education in Britain with a radical critique of schooling, which he characterised as a product of the 'externalism of the West' driven by a cultural fixation on measurable results and 'mechanical obedience' to external authority.[32] His work positioned self-feeling as a crucial link between individual emotional development and collective democratic possibility.

Holmes' analysis rested on a fundamental distinction between healthy and pathological forms of self-feeling. He argued that traditional education, while claiming to build character and citizenship, actually produced the opposite through its emphasis on competition and external

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[27] Ibid., p.119.
[28] Selleck, *English Primary Education*, p.55.
[29] Collins, 'England', pp.200-1.
[30] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.117.
[31] Selleck, *English Primary Education*, p.24.
[32] Edmond Holmes, *What Is and What Might Be: A Study of Education in General and Elementary Education in Particular* (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1912), p.v.

validation.[33] The regime of 'mechanical obedience' – reinforced by physical punishment and competition – that dominated conventional schools created a fundamental split between external behaviour and inner conviction, developing what Holmes termed 'egoism'. 'Egoism' in Holmes' vision was not a healthy kind of self-regard but a defensive, anxious preoccupation with status that made children incapable of authentic democratic participation.[34] This conception of egoism, which Holmes borrowed from emerging psychoanalytic discourse, represented a profound failure of authentic self-feeling and positioned children's emotional development as a diagnostic lens through which to understand broader social pathologies.

Holmes' critique of education was therefore a critique of modern selfhood and the ways in which it was formed through what he perceived to be inadequate educational practices. The child subjected to 'mechanical obedience' developed neither genuine self-respect nor true regard for others. Instead, they became trapped in patterns of fear-driven competition, constantly measuring themselves against external standards and seeking validation through comparison. Holmes argued that this corrupted self-feeling created citizens fundamentally unsuited to democracy, as they lacked the emotional capacity for genuine self-governance or cooperation. This damaged self-feeling manifested as a constant measuring of oneself against external standards, seeking validation through comparison rather than developing self-respect or regard for others – a pattern that Holmes saw as endemic to modern civilisation.[35]

Holmes was an early proponent of a link between self-feeling and wider social anxieties about democratic citizenship and national progress. He argued that the products of traditional education would inevitably perpetuate systems of domination and submission. The competitive individualism fostered in conventional schools prepared citizens not for democracy but for what Holmes darkly called 'incipient anarchy' whereby society was made up of isolated, mutually hostile individuals incapable of genuine cooperation.[36] This anarchy was linked, Holmes argued, to

[33] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, pp.28-9. Tisdall argues that notions of 'traditional' education in this period served as a 'straw man' against which progressive educators set out their own vision of education. It was 'an imagined enemy' more than a real strain of pedagogy.
[34] Holmes, *What Is and What Might Be*, p.209.
[35] Ibid., p.210.
[36] Ibid., p.208.

> [A]n ignoble scramble for wealth, for power, for position, for fame, for notoriety, for anything in fine which may serve to exalt a man above his fellows, and so minister to the aggrandisement of his lower self.[37]

Competitive individualism was linked to a specific kind of self-feeling rooted in egoism. This was not merely an educational critique but a diagnosis of civilisational crisis rooted in the systematic destruction of children's natural capacities for healthy self-development.

To complement his stark warning about education in England, Holmes outlined an alternative vision of education centred on cultivating a different kind of self-concept in children – one that was neither competitive nor individualistic but socially oriented and filled with democratic possibility. In his description of a fictional school tellingly named 'Utopia', healthy self-feeling formed the foundation for a transformed social order. Through 'self-realisation' or 'soul-growth' children would develop from natural self-centredness toward expanded capacities for empathy and social connection without suppressing their authentic selves. Here, children acted with joyful autonomy, motivated by 'pride in their school' and a desire for cooperation, rather than selfish personal advancement.[38] Crucially, Holmes argued that such an environment would erode the self-conscious egoism he believed was endemic to modern life, as children who experienced respect for their authentic selves would naturally develop respect for others.[39]

With regard to self-feeling, Holmes' key insight was that genuine cooperation could not be imposed but must emerge from secure self-regard, establishing a conception of emotional management that situated children's inner lives as the key to social transformation. Children who felt genuinely valued would value their community and those who experienced authentic respect would naturally extend that respect to others. Holmes redefined obedience itself, not as submission to arbitrary external authority, but as realisation of one's 'higher self' and recognition of the needs of others.[40] This vision had explicitly political implications, promising that progressive education could create citizens who were emotionally integrated and capable of transcending the destructive patterns of competitive capitalism and mechanical civilisation. By positioning self-feeling as a foundation of democratic citizenship,

[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., p.158.
[39] Ibid., p.209.
[40] Ibid.

Holmes helped begin the development of a framework that would make children's emotional states a matter of public concern and scrutiny throughout the following century.

Holmes' lasting influence encapsulated growing 'ties between educational reform and the broader new age idealism' characteristic of the interwar period.[41] Holmes himself would go on to perpetuate progressive ideas, translating Maria Montessori's *The Montessori Method* into English in 1912.[42] Indeed, arguments about the political significance of emotional development became increasingly explicit during the 1920s, with educators building on Holmes' insights to develop more systematic approaches to emotional education that would embed self-feeling within official educational discourse. In this decade, a host of independent educational experiments emerged, such as Bertrand and Dora Russell's Beacon Hill School, and A. S. Neill's Summerhill experiment. As Mathew Thomson observes, Neill's Summerhill paid 'homage' to emerging ideas in psychology, notably the 'release of pent-up emotion', although he cited the creative arts as more influential to his pedagogy than the famous psychoanalysts of the era.[43] Summerhill in particular would come to be seen as more radically utopian – focused on self-government and freedom to a far greater extent than discipline – even in contrast to other figureheads of progressive education, including Maria Montessori.[44] As Thomson argues, focusing on these radical experiments has given progressivism an air of radicalism and marginality that obscures how prevalent aspects of it would become.[45] Radical experiments, Tisdall argues, 'ultimately exercise[d] little influence on the development of progressivism in primary and secondary modern schools after 1945'. What persisted in influence was the child-centred vision of progressive pedagogy that framed education 'as a tool for shaping good citizens'.[46]

Progressive schools gained reputations for 'excessive freedom', based on their dismissal of timetables, competition and corporal punishment in favour of cooperation and self-government of children.[47] 'More typical' progressive educators, argues Selleck, included Alice Woods – a former principal of a teacher training college in London who worked as a publicist on topics of progressive education. In Woods' view, progressive teachers wanted to

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[41] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, pp.118-9.
[42] Selleck, *English Primary Education*, p.28.
[43] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, pp.121-2.
[44] Ibid.; Selleck, *English Primary Education*, p.29. Selleck argues that Montessori carried 'the respectability of the scientist and doctor' and succeeded in making 'dangerous terms' like '"freedom", "individuality" and "independence" […] acceptable'.
[45] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.124.
[46] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, pp.4-5.
[47] Selleck, *English Primary Education*, p.52.

do away with arbitrary conventions and rigidities that stifled 'individuality' which had specific connotations relating to potential in the interwar period.[48] In 1920, Woods conducted a series of visits to experimental schools, publishing her findings under the title *Educational Experiments in England,* incorporating psychoanalytic insights into a comprehensive vision of education as preparation for democratic citizenship. In its preface Woods acknowledged her debt to Edmond Holmes, while going further in articulating the political dimensions of emotional education. Woods' work was important as an early consolidation of progressive experiments in England.[49]

Woods argued that education must attend to children's unconscious emotional life, recognising that repression, fear, and self-distrust could undermine moral development in ways that surface instruction could never address. Her analysis centred on the concept of 'liberty', defined in psychological terms as the capacity for inward restraint and self-government, reflecting the growing influence of psychoanalytic thinking on educational theory. She advocated for a form of freedom that combined self-discipline with self-expression, enabling individuals 'to fulfil the unique promise that exists in every human being' as one's 'best self' rather than freedom from structure entirely.[50] Emotional maturity, she insisted, emerged through relationships grounded in respect, empathy, and cooperation, with the classroom serving as a training ground for democratic life where children learned to balance personal growth with responsibility to others.[51] Woods' progressivism was also centred on the notion of 'individuality' which, at the time, was firmly linked to notions of predestined capacity for growth and development, and had been employed by Holmes. One's individuality was one's full human potential.[52] For Woods, individuality could be repressed by excessive discipline which resulted in 'a forced conformity', akin to Holmes' 'mechanical obedience'.[53]

Set against the backdrop of the First World War, Woods' work reflected broader hopes for social renewal. By fostering emotional wellbeing and encouraging children to 'lose themselves in service', her vision of progressive education imagined healthy self-feeling as a

[48] Ibid., pp.52-4.
[49] Ibid., p.121.
[50] Alice Woods, *Educational Experiments in England* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1920), p.221.
[51] Ibid., p.222.
[52] Selleck, *English Primary Education*, p.55.
[53] Ibid., p.56.

bulwark against egoism, authoritarianism, and future conflict. Woods quoted the psychoanalyst Alfred Adler approvingly to reinforce this argument:

> Every human being is valuable, because in all dwells the same spiritual life. Not individualism and not altruism is the satisfying doctrine. Not the good of self, nor the good of others apart, but a higher, overarching good, to promote which is, alike, the highest good of self and of others.[54]

By positing a fundamental harmony between self-realisation and collective wellbeing, Woods' intervention reflected the progressive impulse to resolve tension between individual development and social responsibility. The emotionally healthy individual would naturally seek connection and contribution rather than domination or withdrawal, making the cultivation of authentic self-feeling both personally fulfilling and socially beneficial.

The relevance of psychoanalysis to burgeoning ideas of selfhood and self-feeling in new education was put forward most thoroughly by Susan Isaacs. Isaacs was a practising psychoanalyst employed at another experimental school: Malting House in Cambridge.[55] By 1933, Isaacs had published two key texts on childhood development and was employed as the head of the new Department of Child Development at the London Institute of Education.[56] Her detailed documentation of children's anxieties, fantasies, and social negotiations revealed how self-appraisals were constructed through daily interactions, as children worked through fundamental questions about their own worth, capabilities, and place within the social world.[57] She has also been credited with popularising the lessons she learnt about self-expression, creativity, and freedom within a pioneer school. Michal Shapira demonstrates that Isaacs disseminated these insights about children's self-development to a mass audience through her work with parenting magazine *Nursery World*, 'help[ing] shift the focus of caregivers to the child's perspective', and teaching parents in particular 'to acknowledge children as independent subjects and future democratic citizens' whose emotional well-being was central to their capacity for social participation.[58]

Isaacs' pedagogical observations reinforced Holmes' earlier insight that genuine cooperation could not be imposed but must emerge from secure individual development. As she observed

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[54] Alfred Adler, cited in Woods, *Educational Experiments*, pp.244-5.
[55] Selleck, *English Primary Education*, p.37.
[56] Ibid., p.38.
[57] Shapira, '"Speaking Kleinian"', p.530.
[58] Ibid., p.525.

in 1932, the relationship between individual and social development required careful calibration that respected children's developmental stages while fostering genuine cooperation. Although Isaacs would eventually critique the 'over-schematic stages of development' characteristic of Piagetian developmental psychology, she warned against forcing premature social norms about cooperation onto children.[59] She noted that 'social and communal' activities offered an important remedy to the emphasis on 'individual work and individual progress' that characterised 'formal' education, but urged teachers to 'not strive too hard for unselfishness, nor try to force the "team-spirit" prematurely. If we do, we may stultify their growth'. Instead, educators were encouraged to allow the child to 'frankly enjoy his pride in his own prowess' while natural social experiences gradually fostered broader perspectives: 'The seed will ripen in its own time, if we but sow it. It is inactivity that is barren'.[60] Here Isaacs implied that a genuine cooperative spirit could not be imposed but must emerge from secure individual development, but that this in turn required on the part of adults a degree of knowledge about how best to manage children's feelings about themselves.

These insights found expression across different educational contexts during the interwar years, demonstrating how concerns about self-feeling were becoming embedded in practical pedagogy. In the state sector, while constraints of class size and resources limited wholesale innovation, progressive ideas found expression in areas such as physical education, speech training, and infant schooling. The 1918 New Ideals in Education conference papers published by the conference committee, revealed how the ideas of new educationalists were already circulating in classroom practice. John Arrowsmith's account of 'physiological education' at the progressive Mixenden School articulated a clear rejection of the competitive ethos that had infiltrated classrooms through examinations and scholarships, likening it to the 'trade rivalry' of the 'commercial world' and noting that 'the average child has quite enough competition and selfishness in his nature without receiving encouragement in the schools'. Instead, Arrowsmith advocated for communal learning environments that encouraged mutual respect and sensory engagement with the world.[61]

Progressive educators tended to share a concern about self-feeling which remained rooted in broader social critique, but there was already emerging a proliferation of different and

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[59] Ibid., p.529.
[60] Susan Isaacs, *The Children We Teach* (London: University of London Press, 1932), p.26; p.99.
[61] John Arrowsmith, 'Physiological Education in an Elementary School', in *Committee of New Ideals in Education, Educational Experiments by Head Teachers in Elementary Schools: Five Papers Read Before the New Ideals in Education Conferences* (1918), p.10.

sometimes contradictory ideas about how self-feeling should be understood and managed. Holmes' interest in avoiding egotism in children was being displaced by the idea that so-called 'normal' children might be intrinsically self-centred. Natural selfishness and egocentricity were increasingly viewed as permissible developmental stages for young children – to be expected and respected, rather than immediately corrected. Meanwhile, other groups of children, particularly those classified as 'backwards' and who may otherwise prove socially problematic, were simultaneously being identified as requiring targeted interventions to build up their reserves of confidence and self-regard. During the 1918 New Ideals in Education conference, an account of a girls' elementary school addressed the challenge of fostering self-confidence and self-realisation among so-called 'backward' children and argued that these children needed particular attention to 'gain confidence' to 'grip that she may do useful work in the world'.[62] By 1933, a Board of Education report on infant and nursery schools drew explicitly on the work of Susan Isaacs and developmental psychologists like Jean Piaget, whose research on cognitive development provided additional scientific framework for progressive approaches.[63] The report's observation that young children were naturally 'self-centred individualists' who should not be forced into premature cooperation reflected the extent to which these ideas had become incorporated into policy discourse.[64] This differentiation suggested that self-feeling was beginning to operate not merely as a universal principle of child development, but as a diagnostic category that distinguished between different types of children and different emotional needs. Mathew Thomson has argued that psychology in the interwar period, rather than supporting 'the side of radical experiment' instead helped carve out 'a middle way between discipline and freedom'.[65] In regard to self-feeling too, psychology was invoked to support both interventionist and non-interventionist strategies when it came to how children felt about themselves.

Through disparate frameworks and visions, new educationalists in the interwar period successfully attached both hope and anxiety to children's self-feeling. Historians have challenged the extent to which psychoanalysis fundamentally influenced education in this period, but by positioning self-feeling as both the promise of democratic renewal and a potential source of social pathology, progressive educators created a psychology-informed

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[62] N. Price, 'Independent Study in a Girls' School', in *Committee of New Ideals in Education, Educational Experiments by Head Teachers in Elementary Schools: Five Papers Read Before the New Ideals in Education Conferences* (1918), pp.20-1.
[63] Board of Education Consultative Committee, *Infant and Nursery Schools*, HMSO (1933), p.84.
[64] Ibid., p.121.
[65] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.124.

framework that made children's emotional states a matter of public concern whilst simultaneously generating new uncertainties about how their emotional lives should be managed or directed.[66] Their influence on classroom practice was often limited by structural factors, but self-feeling became a key theoretical mediator between individual development and collective social goals that would prove central to twentieth-century debates about childhood, education, and citizenship. The translation of these ideas into official policy discourse by the Board of Education and in small-scale classroom practice demonstrated how quickly concerns about children's emotional development had moved from the margins to the centre of educational debate. These developments established the conceptual groundwork for the more comprehensive transformations that would follow the Second World War, embedding concerns about children's emotional states within the architecture of state education policy.

The 1921 Newbolt Report titled *The Teaching of English in England* represented a significant moment in the official recognition of progressive educational ideals, particularly self-expression. The report articulated a vision of education that divided it into three areas of 'training': 'the will', 'the intellect', and 'the emotions'.[67] The report foregrounded self-feeling and self-expression as central pedagogical aims, treating these not as sentimental concepts but as essential for healthy psychological development and the cultivation of self-respect, self-confidence, and mutual understanding.[68] Its discussion of drama is particularly revealing in this regard. Performance was framed not just as a cultural exercise, but as a vehicle for overcoming personal insecurities, providing 'training in judgement, in self-confidence, and in general alertness.'[69] It argued that children previously regarded as 'stupid' were able to reveal latent abilities through creative work, thereby gaining a 'new interest in themselves and their possibilities.'[70] This transformation of children through creative work was understood to have profound social implications, as children who could not express themselves were not merely inarticulate but emotionally stunted, unable to participate fully in human relationships or democratic discourse. The report celebrated schools which 'have emancipated themselves from the repressive methods of the past' by 'providing conditions which allow free play to the children's natural mental growth,' positioning self-expression as

[66] Ibid., p.123.
[67] Board of Education Departmental Committee, *The Teaching of English in England*, HMSO (1921), p.9.
[68] Ibid., p.22.
[69] Ibid., p.316.
[70] Ibid.

fundamental to psychological health and social capability.[71] This represented an early indication that self-feeling was beginning to infiltrate broader concerns about social cohesion and national progress, with children's emotional states positioned as indicators of collective wellbeing.

Following Newbolt, the series of reports produced by the Board of Education's Consultative Committee under Sir Henry Hadow's chairmanship during the 1920s and early 1930s represented perhaps the most systematic attempt to translate progressive ideals about self-feeling into official policy recommendations. As Selleck observes of the Hadow committee, which received evidence from individual progressive figures as well as the New Education Fellowship, 'it took up many of the progressive views with vigour and confidence'.[72] According to Selleck, the progressive ideas satisfied policymakers 'who did not have time to forge their own educational vocabularies but who were not satisfied to mouth the conventional pieties'.[73] Although more cautious than the radical experiments of independent progressive schools, the Hadow Reports nonetheless incorporated key progressive insights about emotional development, positioning self-feeling as a legitimate concern of state education policy whilst establishing new frameworks for understanding and managing children's emotional needs.

The 1923 Hadow Report *The Differentiation of the Curriculum for Boys and Girls* occupied a distinctive place in institutionalising progressive educational ideals, advocating for flexibility that took account of pupils' varying interests, capacities, and emotional needs rather than rigid prescriptions. While the report retained some traditional assumptions, depicting girls as possessing 'a greater tendency to emotion' and boys as 'more self-assertive', it emphasised that 'very great individual differences' existed between pupils and that such characteristics were not uniformly distributed.[74] This helped to establish psychological characteristics as legitimate grounds for educational differentiation. Significantly, the report recognised non-academic forms of achievement as important for emotional development and self-worth, particularly for pupils who did not benefit from traditional academic learning. Voluntary societies and extracurricular activities, it argued, made valuable contributions because they

[71] Ibid., p.69.
[72] Selleck, *English Primary Education*, pp.125-6.
[73] Ibid., p.123.
[74] Board of Education Consultative Committee, *Differentiation of the Curriculum for Boys and Girls Respectively in Secondary Schools*, HMSO (1923), pp.86-94.

> Give an opportunity for self-development and for winning self-respect, and the respect of their fellows, to some pupils who, for one reason or another, fail to succeed in the more formal branches of school life or in games.[75]

This endorsement of alternative educational spaces reflected the influence of holistic, progressive pedagogy whilst establishing self-respect as a measurable outcome that required systematic attention and support.

Although it did not reference self-feeling specifically, the 1924 Hadow Report on psychological tests offered a cautious perspective on intelligence testing that created space for emotional factors to be recognised as crucial to educational assessment. While acknowledging that tests could provide useful insights, the committee warned against treating them as definitive, insisting that intelligence was too complex to be reduced to a single score.[76] The report included a memorandum by Susan Isaacs arguing that children's test performance could be shaped by unconscious emotional responses, with the same test having 'very different effects on different children according to the "complexes" which are aroused in the unconscious self'.[77] Latent emotions and complexes could influence, as well as be influenced by, educational methodologies.

The next report, published two years later, was notable for the extent to which it was influenced and contributed to by psychologists.[78] The report focused on the education of adolescents, and illustrated how closely emotional development in education was linked to ideas about national character and collective wellbeing. The report framed adolescence not only as a psychologically sensitive period but as a moment of civic and moral formation with implications extending far beyond individual development. Responding to perceived threats from rapid industrialisation, the report warned that modern economic life encouraged 'a narrow specialisation of faculty' and 'a patterned uniformity of work and behaviour' that could erode the individuality and emotional capacities of future citizens.[79] Rather than choosing between individual development and social utility, the committee argued for 'social individuality' grounded in a 'well-balanced education system' that would 'offer the fullest possible scope to individuality', while simultaneously 'keeping steadily in view the claims

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[75] Ibid., pp.110-1.
[76] Board of Education Consultative Committee, *Psychological Tests of Educable Capacity and Their Possible Use in the Public System of Education*, HMSO (1924), p.126.
[77] Ibid., p.95.
[78] Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, pp.225-6.
[79] Board of Education Consultative Committee, *The Education of the Adolescent*, HMSO (1926), p.xxiv.

and needs of the society in which every individual citizen must live'.[80] 'Practical instruction' in particular was framed as particularly important for cultivating 'added self-respect' stemming from accomplishment and ability, which would spread to other areas of education.[81] In this formulation, emotional and moral formation were positioned not in tension with national aims but as central to them, with self-feeling operating as a mediator that could bridge the apparent gulf between individual fulfilment and collective needs.

By the late 1920s, political interest in self-development through education was evident in the Labour Party's growing interest in educational reform, which reflected this progressive synthesis whilst further embedding concerns about self-feeling within political discourse about national development. The party's 1928 manifesto *Labour and the Nation* adopted progressive language to envision primary schools as spaces of 'creative activity, with full opportunities for personal attention, individual study, and practical work'.[82] The manifesto explicitly linked educational reform to broader social transformation, committing the party to securing 'standards of life and employment which are necessary to a healthy, independent, and self-respecting existence' whilst warning against 'waste of the intelligence and character, on which the nation will depend in the next generation'.[83] By positioning self-respect and self-discipline as necessary for democratic and economic participation, the manifesto aligned emotional development with collective security and productivity, treating children's psychological development as a national resource requiring careful cultivation.

The penultimate Hadow Report published in 1931 on primary education articulated the progressive vision most comprehensively and influentially, opening with the insistence that schools must be understood as 'a training ground of the mind' that attended to 'the actual fact' of what children were, in 'a single-minded devotion to their needs in the present' rather than predetermined expectations about what 'children should be'.[84] As Selleck has argued, the report demonstrated the extent to which 'the progressives were penetrating into official circles.'[85] Wooldridge points to the 'superabundance' of psychological ideas about education by this point, which helped to reinforce their influence in the 1931 report. Wooldridge notes that 'the committee's witnesses seldom tired of reiterating progressive orthodoxy'.[86] The

[80] Ibid., p.101.
[81] Ibid., p.231.
[82] The Labour Party, *Labour and the Nation* (London: The Labour Party, 1928), p.40.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Board of Education Consultative Committee, *The Primary School*, HMSO (1931), p.xv.
[85] Selleck, *English Primary Education*, p.125.
[86] Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, p.226.

report responded to the changing social context of the interwar years by arguing that educational aims could no longer be confined to basic literacy or preparation for industrial work, proposing instead a more expansive developmental vision that recognised how contemporary schools 'have to teach children how to live'.[87] Crucially, the 1931 report expanded the psychological horizons of education by foregrounding emotional development as a central objective, calling on schools and teachers to 'cultivate the imagination', 'appeal to the emotions', and foster 'a reasonable degree of self-confidence, together with a social or team-spirit'.[88] This embedded emotional expression and regulation into the architecture of national schooling, treating the child's affective world not as a private matter but as essential to learning, moral formation, and democratic citizenship. By positioning self-feeling as both an educational outcome and a prerequisite for other forms of development, the report established emotional management as a fundamental responsibility of state education.

The report used psychoanalytical insights to reinterpret behavioural and academic failure, framing 'laziness' as a 'defence mechanism arising out of genuine physical weakness' and linking 'squalid environments' to a 'lack of mental vitality.'[89] This represented a movement away from moral judgement toward emotional support, with problems that had previously been attributed to character defects now understood as responses to environmental conditions that could be addressed through appropriate intervention. Thus, although Thomson observes that psychoanalysis held only a minor influence in the wider educational 'agenda', its language had penetrated official discourse as a new vocabulary of self and emotion, helping to situate self-feeling as a lens through which to understand and address a wide range of social problems.[90]

The most freedom-oriented ideas of the most experimental schools remained sidelined, as theorists 'accepted the compromise between freedom and discipline' and eschewed the more controversial Freudian concepts.[91] Nevertheless, language of self-feeling and emotional development provided a palatable vocabulary for incorporating psychological perspectives into educational discourse. However, this in turn unlocked concern about emotional *mis*management. By 1931, the Board of Education report was explicit in its identification of

[87] Board of Education Consultative Committee, *The Primary School*, p.93.
[88] Ibid., p.xvi.; p.71.
[89] Ibid., pp.xviii-xix.
[90] Thomson, *Psychological* Subjects, p.123.
[91] Ibid.

poor self-image as 'one of the greatest obstacles' to the progress of the struggling child.[92] Concern about self-feeling in childhood would also find a particularly acute expression in popular parenting advice literature, where psychoanalytic concepts like the 'inferiority complex' would translate progressive insights about emotional vulnerability into more accessible but also more alarming terms about the psychological risks facing modern children.

2.2 The Inferiority Complex in Interwar England

Proponents of the new education examined in the previous section had successfully established a connection between self-feeling, democratic citizenship and social renewal, often envisioning an optimistic alternative future where children would develop healthy self-regard given the appropriate educational environments, fulfilling their true potential as socially-responsible citizens. In relation to self-feeling, childrearing experts, influenced by the same psychoanalytical ideas, set out to provide more clarity to parents. This section argues that this anxiety found particularly acute expression in popular discussions of the 'inferiority complex', which translated progressive insights about emotional vulnerability into more accessible but also more alarming terms. The concept as employed in parenting advice literature offered seemingly straightforward explanations for childhood difficulties and clear prescriptions for parental action, whilst reinforcing profound anxieties about children's emotional fragility and parents' responsibility for managing it. The stakes, commentators insisted, were high – children who developed chronic inferiority feelings would be unable to function as responsible citizens, becoming instead sources of social pathology. Although the concept proved a more uniform framework for understanding self-feeling, it was not uniformly received as useful or positive information about children and childrearing. The concept was at once embraced as a kind of common sense and resisted and ridiculed by lay commentators.

The 'inferiority complex' was first posited by Austrian psychoanalyst Alfred Adler in 1907. The idea took hold of popular imagination in interwar England, fitting into the burgeoning trends of 'new psychology' and 'practical psychology' which sought to apply psychoanalysis

[92] Board of Education Consultative Committee, *The Primary School,* p.90.

to problems of everyday life through self-knowledge, self-help and self-improvement.[93] Childrearing was increasingly an area in which parents were encouraged to use these insights. Parents were positioned as crucial mediators of their children's self-feeling, contrasting with the most 'utopian' progressive educators' insistence that children required minimal adult intervention for healthy development.[94] The inferiority complex represented a particularly mobile and malleable idea that tapped into 'common sense' ideas about childrearing, addressing longstanding moral concerns about pride and the 'spoilt' child, positioning them not as inherently egotistical as in the model assumed by progressive educators and psychoanalysts like Susan Isaacs, but as uniquely vulnerable to feelings of personal inferiority. This contradictory polarity of emotional expectations about children became a major source of anxiety about how to manage the self-feeling of children in the twentieth century. What was clear, however, was perceived social consequences of deficit or excess of self-regard.

The inferiority complex emerged as one of the most influential psychological concepts of the interwar period, becoming what proponent of practical psychology W. J. McBride described on the eve of the Second World War as 'one of the popular phrases of [the] age'.[95] As this section will argue, its rise to prominence reflected the broader popularisation of psychoanalytic ideas after the First World War, but the inferiority complex also owed its particular appeal to its apparent distance from psychoanalysis' more controversial aspects, offering a framework for understanding the emotional lives of children specifically that seemed both scientific and morally acceptable.

The concept was developed by Alfred Adler as an alternative to Freudian psychoanalysis. Just as a damaged kidney would work harder to restore balance, Adler believed 'superiority striving' met feelings of inferiority and provided essential motivation to overcome adversity.[96] For Adler, some degree of inferiority feeling was inevitable and beneficial, providing motivation for personal growth. The inferiority *complex* emerged only when individuals failed to develop healthy compensation mechanisms, becoming trapped in cycles of self-doubt and defensive behaviour.[97] The left-handed child provided his commonplace

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[93] Adler first coined the term inferiority complex in his 1907 work *Study of Organ Inferiority and its Psychical Compensation* which was translated into English in 1917*;* Collins, 'England', pp.201-2.
[94] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, p.3.
[95] W. J. McBride, *The Inferiority Complex: Its Meaning and Treatment* (Letchworth: The Garden City Press, 1934), p.7.
[96] 'The man who gave us "inferiority complex"', *New York Times*, 28th February 1971, p.10.
[97] Alfred Adler, *The Science of Living* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930), pp.66-74.

example: while at risk of becoming disheartened by their 'clumsiness' when forced to write with their right hand, such children often appeared more motivated than their right-handed classmates, linking left-handedness to 'a great advantage in developing artistic talent and ability'.[98] The child who failed to overcome a sense of inadequacy however, could instead develop heightened and chronic feelings of inferiority.[99]

Adler had been prolific in his publications, producing 13 titles ranging from dense theoretical works to accessible advice texts. His global lecturing tours in the 1920s and 1930s took him away from Austria when, as a Jewish Austrian, the political landscape became increasingly precarious. He took a university position in medical psychology in the US, though individual psychology groups existed worldwide by the 1930s.[100] Adler's influence in Britain extended through the Medical Society of Individual Psychology based at the Gower Street Club in London, and by the time he died during a world tour in Scotland in 1937, he enjoyed celebrity status and the language of the inferiority complex was firmly embedded in popular discourse.[101]

The inferiority complex also fitted naturally into the emerging 'new psychology' that centred the unconscious mind and sought to make psychoanalytic insights practically useful for everyday life.[102] As proponent of psychoanalysis G. Tansley argued in 1920, the problem with earlier psychology had been its lack of applicability to 'life as it is actually lived'.[103] Its tenets were centred on the mind and the self, and summarised by J. A. Hadfield in 1923 in three 'principles of psychological health: "know thyself; accept thyself; be thyself"'.[104] The new psychology promised to remedy the lack of practical utility in traditional psychology by translating expert knowledge into accessible guidance for personal improvement. Adler's emphasis on conscious control over psychological processes made his ideas ideal for this self-help tradition. Unlike Freudian theory, which portrayed individuals as largely at the mercy of unconscious forces, Adlerian psychology suggested that people could actively shape their psychological development. The individual was, in Adler's phrase, 'the "novelist" of his

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[98] Ibid., p.66.
[99] Ibid.
[100] 'The man who gave us "inferiority complex"', *New York Times*, 28th February 1971, p.10.
[101] Pam Hirsch, 'Apostle of Freedom: Alfred Adler and his British Disciples', *History of Education* 34.5 (2005), p.477.; Michael Maniacci, 'An Introduction to Alfred Adler', in *Alfred Adler Revisited*, ed. by Jon Carlson and Michael Maniacci (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp.5-6.
[102] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, pp.61-2.
[103] A. G. Tansley, *The New Psychology and its Relation to Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1920), p.19.
[104] J. A. Hadfield, *Psychology and Morals: an Analysis of Character* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1923), cited in Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.62.

own character', possessing the power to overcome inferiority feelings through conscious effort and appropriate environmental support.[105]

Another more specific vehicle for the popularisation of psychoanalysis was the 'practical psychology' movement which emerged at the intersection, Mathew Thomson notes, between Freudian psychoanalysis and 'occultism and spiritualism'.[106] The most common connotation of 'practical psychology' was a popular 'enthusiasm for psychology as a practical tool within regimes of self-improvement'.[107] Within this enthusiasm, the inferiority complex was incorporated into its 'diverse culture of psychological thought and practice'.[108] The movement emphasised equipping individuals with psychological tools through local groups and accessible mail-order pamphlets. The popular magazine *The Psychologist* published a series of 21 'practical psychology handbooks' from 1938, each describing causes, consequences and treatments for psychological ailments including neurasthenia, nervous tension and worry. The first instalment in the series focused on the inferiority complex. On its front cover it declared it was aimed at readers susceptible to fatigue, 'nervous mannerisms', negativity and timidity.[109] The pamphlet outlined the causes of the inferiority complex while providing readers means to overcome the affliction. Its cover included the exclamation: 'Don't feel inferior! Find out what's wrong with you.'[110] Readers were advised they could overcome an inferiority complex without intervention or assistance from expert psychiatrists or psychoanalysts.[111] Thus the inferiority complex was integrated into burgeoning areas of popular psychology and reaching mass, enthusiastic audiences in the interwar period.

Most significantly for its application to children, the inferiority complex – and Adlerian psychology more broadly – contained crucial distinctions from Freudian psychoanalysis. While Freud explained neurosis through unresolved sexual conflicts, Adler argued that psychological difficulties stemmed from failed attempts to compensate for universal feelings of inadequacy. This distinction proved crucial to the concept's popular appeal. Unlike Freudian theory, which insisted that 'the basis of life [was] sexual', Adlerian psychology offered explanations compatible with conventional moral frameworks. W. J. McBride emphasised this point, noting that Adler had 'proved' that feelings of inferiority were

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[105] Adler, *The Science of* Living, p.227.
[106] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.18.
[107] Ibid., p.19.
[108] Ibid., p.51.
[109] McBride, *Inferiority Complex*, back cover.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid., pp.27-8.

unconnected to sexuality.[112] This made the concept particularly suitable for discussions of children, allowing parents to engage with psychological ideas without confronting uncomfortable questions about childhood sexuality. Since the 1800s, childhood had been viewed as a period of innocence 'unpolluted by any form of precocity', extending to notions of asexuality.[113] The distinction between Adler and Freud thus helped make the inferiority complex a particularly compelling and palatable vehicle for transporting psychoanalytic ideas to discussions of children without affronting moral sensibilities.

The focus on children was sustained in part because of its association with what Mathew Thomson has called the 'feminisation' of practical psychology in the interwar period.[114] Women's magazines and advice columns frequently discussed the inferiority complex, often in connection with childrearing responsibilities. The concept seemed to offer mothers scientific validation for their intuitive concerns about their children's emotional wellbeing, while simultaneously providing clear guidance about how to address these concerns. This made it particularly attractive to middle-class women who were increasingly expected to take active interest in their children's psychological development.[115]

As the 'inferiority complex' entered popular discourse, it underwent significant transformation and misrepresentation. Adler himself came to critique the phrase for failing to convey the severity of an 'inferiority that permeates the whole personality' which was more akin to a 'disease'.[116] Expert commentators regularly complained about the 'abuse' of the term by laypeople who failed to understand its specific meaning.[117] McBride discussed the concept's popularity but lamented how it was often employed 'without any clear conception of what it really means', regularly conflated with pessimism or negative attitudes more generally.[118] The careful distinction Adler had drawn between normal inferiority feelings and pathological complexes was frequently lost, with any form of self-doubt or shyness being labelled an 'inferiority complex'. Oliver Brachfeld observed that 'the dint of constant use by the layman' had caused the term to lose its intended 'technical meaning', joining other psychoanalytic concepts oversimplified through popular usage.[119] This misunderstanding was

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[112] Ibid., p.7.
[113] Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English Society*, p.12.
[114] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, pp.47-51.
[115] Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English Society*, p.27.
[116] Adler, *The Science of Living*, p.74.
[117] Douglas Thom, *Everyday Problems of the Everyday Child* (London: D. Appleton and London, 1933), p.193.
[118] McBride, *Inferiority* Complex, p.7.
[119] Oliver Brachfeld, *Inferiority Feelings: in the Individual and the Group*, transl. by Marjorie Gabain (1951, repr. Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p.34.

particularly evident in discussions of children. Where Adler had viewed inferiority feeling as a normal part of human development, popular advice increasingly portrayed any negative self-evaluation in children as dangerous and requiring immediate intervention. As the rest of this chapter will demonstrate, parents were warned against allowing their children to experience failure or unfavourable comparison with others, lest these experiences trigger lasting psychological damage. Such advice departed significantly from Adler's original emphasis on the value of overcoming difficulties, but proved more appealing to anxious parents seeking clear guidance about protecting their children.

Despite the frustration this caused experts, the concept's malleability contributed to its widespread adoption. It could explain everything from individual shyness to social problems, providing a remarkably versatile framework for understanding diverse forms of distress. By 1939, new psychology author S. G. McLellan bemoaned the prevalence of the inferiority complex whilst betraying the extent to which it had taken hold in popular imagination, noting that every week one could find someone writing to the local paper seeking help to address the affliction, while its more positive aspects tended to be ignored.[120] The inferiority complex had become, in effect, a catch-all explanation for psychological difficulties of self-concept that seemed both scientific and comprehensible to ordinary people. By the 1930s, the inferiority complex had become sufficiently embedded in popular consciousness to attract ridicule from those who viewed it as a fashionable excuse for poor behaviour or inadequate parenting. The concept had helped elevate self-feeling into a matter of concern and widespread debate, establishing the idea that children's emotional responses to themselves were both psychologically significant and socially consequential. Having traced the origins and popularisation of the inferiority complex concept, the following section examines how parenting advice experts deployed this framework to construct children as emotionally vulnerable subjects requiring careful management.

The inferiority complex contributed to a shift in how childhood vulnerability was understood. As Peter Stearns observes, the 'sturdy' child of the nineteenth century was supplanted by an understanding of children who were 'fragile' and in need of 'careful handling' in the interest of protecting 'their shaky self-esteem'.[121] While earlier concerns about child welfare had focused on malnutrition, disease and material deprivation, the new psychology suggested that

[120] S. G. McLellan, *The New Psychology* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1939), pp.34-5.
[121] Peter Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p.3.

emotional damage could be equally devastating and potentially more lasting. Children were reconceptualised as psychologically fragile beings whose self-concept required careful protection from the earliest stages of development.

This reconceptualisation began with the premise that all children were inherently susceptible to inferiority feelings. Catherine Gasquoine Hartley, whose 1923 work *Mother and Son* became influential in childrearing circles encapsulated this vision. Hartley had been appointed headmistress of Babington House public school in Kent in 1894 but from 1901 dedicated herself to writing.[122] She employed her knowledge gained as a teacher and adoptive mother in her 'common sense' literature about childrearing.[123] Writing in the 1910s and 1920s, she mirrored Susan Isaacs in urging parents to empathise with and understand their children and their unconscious minds, acknowledging as she did so that she would 'be compelled to advance certain unpopular doctrines'. She linked this to 'a widespread and very deep prejudice' toward psychoanalysis, which she linked to its separation from real problems of everyday life. She promised to address this in her work.[124] Hartley was far from mainstream in her views, but her controversial nature helped carve out debate around social mores and childrearing. She was a regular contributor to national news publications including the *Daily Mirror* and conservative publications like *John Bull*. Although reviews acknowledged that few would agree with her work in its entirety, she was commended for being candid, individual and earnest.[125]

Mother and Son focused on explaining to parents how to understand their children's susceptibility to inferiority feeling, as well as on the mother's culpability in instigating negative self-feeling. The book was also, at least in part, a defence of psychoanalysis put in layman's terms, reflecting many of the new psychology and practical psychology impulses to ground psychoanalysis in matters of everyday life. Hartley employed the specific language of practical psychology, outlining her intentions to 'reveal' the emotional landscape of the child 'for the first time and in a practical way', providing insights from which caregivers could

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[122] Kirsty Hooper, 'Hartley [married names Gallichan; Lewis], Catherine Gasquoine', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-55594> [Date accessed 13th November 2024]

[123] Catherine Gasquoine Hartley, *Mother and Son: a Psychological Study of Character Formation in Children* (London: Eveleigh Nash & Grayson, 1923), p.16. Hartley was keen to convince her readers of her position as an 'amateur' – gleaned from her own experience as a mother which she wanted to impart to parents 'in a comprehensive picture, simple and clear for everyone to understand'.

[124] Gasquoine Hartley, *Mother and Son*, pp.17-20.

[125] 'The Modern Woman', *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 1st April 1920; Hartley was killed in a traffic incident in 1928, just as the type of work she produced – childrearing advice along practical psychology lines – was beginning to take off, perhaps explaining why she has received relatively little attention within this sphere.

help children develop healthily.[126] Hartley was explicitly sceptical of 'experts' and attempted to distance her own advice as distinct, drawn from experience rather than theory, despite regularly invoking both Adler and Freud. She was most critical of behaviourist 'child-trainers' who she believed regarded the child 'as something to be improved and instructed on a definite plan' and failing to provide the child with 'human treatment'.[127] Instead, her intention was one of simplicity and clarity, rooted in common sense gathered from personal experience. Hartley's work synthesised the major selling points of Adlerian psychoanalysis with its emphasis on self-governance, asexuality and applicability to the everyday problems of motherhood.

Hartley's application of the inferiority complex helped inform a new conception of childhood that was inherently vulnerable after infancy. She argued that children 'start life feeling like gods […] confident in their own perfection' and 'unblunted by experience of failure.' Yet this initial self-assurance made them particularly vulnerable when they encountered obstacles or criticism. Once 'the child is […] deposed from its throne', Hartley warned, the transition could prove psychological damaging.[128] Hartley was explicit about the threat of inferiority in childhood:

> Inferiority is one of the darkest shadows that dogs the footsteps of the small child in the big adult world: it may dominate long periods of the inner life; if may come to rule the whole outer destiny. Inferiority can be the secret source of genius; and it may also be the seed of crime and vice.[129]

Other commentators joined Hartley in emphasising children's vulnerability. Childrearing author Muriel Wrinch also espoused this idea when she wrote in 1924 about naughtiness in children, which resulted, she argued, from the moment that the baby in 'glorious sovereignty' is confronted by 'doubts and fears and misgivings' such as an unanswered cry which induce inferiority.[130] Adler reiterated this idea in his 1930 work *The Education of Children*, which warned that children were 'extraordinarily sensitive to difficulties' and viewed 'failure in any given task' as confirmation of their own 'incapacity'.[131] W. J. McBride, in the practical psychology pamphlet about the inferiority complex, argued children's status as not-adults

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[126] Gasquoine Hartley, *Mother and Son*, p.20.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid., p.81.
[129] Ibid., p.14.
[130] Edginton, 'Inferiority', pp.70-1.
[131] Alfred Adler, *The Education of Children*, trans. by Eleanore and Friedrich Jensen (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1930), p.97.

rendered them susceptible to inferiority. McBride wrote that childhood was inherently defined by a sense of 'helplessness' and a dependence on others for basic needs, creating conditions that naturally fostered inferiority feelings. This vulnerability was compounded by 'the length of time which the child takes to grow up', during which children remained acutely aware of their 'economic and social inferiority' relative to adults.[132] From this perspective, inferiority feelings were an inevitable consequence of the child's position rather than evidence of individual pathology.

This psychological vulnerability was seen as universal rather than confined to particular groups of children. While some writing applied the concept to specific children in specific circumstances, such as 'the very puny boy' or the 'very unattractive girl', the inferiority complex discourse explicitly concerned itself with ordinary children from respectable families.[133] May Edginton, writing in the middle-class women's pictorial magazine *Britannia & Eve*, argued that it was actually the 'mediocre' child who was most at risk of developing lasting inferiority feelings. Children with obvious disabilities might receive appropriate support and develop resilience, while exceptionally gifted children could draw on their successes to maintain confidence. But average children lacked these resources and were therefore most vulnerable to psychological damage.[134] This universalisation of emotional vulnerability marked a crucial shift in how childhood itself was understood, transforming inferiority feeling from a problem affecting exceptional cases into a fundamental feature of the emotional architecture of childhood that demanded widespread social attention.

Inferiority feeling was also used to explain and predict children's behaviour. Hartley linked misbehaviour in children to inferiority feeling, urging adults to limit opportunities for children to make comparisons between themselves and others.[135] Without proper intervention, children would compensate for inferiority-feeling with a 'desire for power' leading to negative behaviours.[136] The 'natural' response of children, Hartley observed, was to daydream and imagine an idealised version of themselves in an effort 'to bring back comfort and to restore the first feelings of childish omnipotence'.[137] Left unchecked, this imaginative exercise could result in boastfulness and showing off as a defence mechanism.[138]

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[132] McBride, *Inferiority* Complex, p.12.
[133] Edginton, 'Inferiority', pp.70-1.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Catherine Gasquoine Hartley, *The Mind of the Naughty Child* (London: A. M. Philpot, 1917), pp.21-3.
[136] Ibid., p.25.
[137] Gasquoine Hartley, *Mother and Son*, p.87.
[138] Ibid., p.88.

It was the parents' responsibility to ensure their children avoided engaging in this 'dream-life' which was the first sign of inferiority complex.[139] The message was clear to parents that without constant and proactive intervention, the innate conflicts and complexes in all children had the potential to develop into vice and dysfunction later in adulthood.[140]

Popular advice consistently stressed that the early years were crucial for psychological development, with lasting consequences extending far into adulthood. Hartley opened *Mother and Son* with an urgent message about 'the importance of the beginning':

> So few of us recognise yet in any practical way the prominence of the first five nursery years in guiding, and even determining, the child's character: a guidance so inescapable, so permanent, that the whole after adult life is directed, and, in some cases, decided in these years. So much is involved. We have got to realise in a more literal way that the child is, in truth, the father to the man. Do you see the responsibilities that this implies? If we blunder and fail, from the beginning, there is no certain escape for the child. Here is the first scaffolding which will remain, however elaborately we build and rebuild above and around it.[141]

Here Hartley invoked the Freudian principle that 'the child is father to the man', but translated it into terms that emphasised parental responsibility. McBride made the stakes of childhood emotional management similarly explicit, declaring that 'in the first years of infancy the child forms his (or her) pattern of life. The man is made or unmade before he leaves the cradle.'[142]

The consequences of failing to protect children from inferiority feelings were frequently portrayed in dire terms. Adult psychological difficulties were routinely traced back to childhood experiences of inadequacy or humiliation. S. G. McLellan's popular psychology text warned that adults with inferiority complexes could be identified by characteristics including 'superior airs', 'extreme sensitivities', and a 'cynical hypercritical attitude toward others'.[143] Such individuals were likely to become 'rebels, criminals and parasites'.[144] Hartley described the 'neurotic' adult with 'abnormally strong feelings of inferiority' as identifiable

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[139] Ibid.,
[140] Stearns, *Anxious Parents*, p.22.
[141] Gasquoine Hartley, *Mother and Son*, p.10.
[142] McBride, *Inferiority Complex*, p.11.
[143] McLellan, *The New Psychology*, p.39.
[144] McBride, *Inferiority Complex*, p.17.

by ‘sensitiveness’, and ‘tendency to anxiety’, as well as ‘tyranny and malevolence’.[145] These warnings drew explicitly on contemporary anxieties about social disorder and political extremism. Writing in 1938, McBride linked the inferiority complex to broader patterns of violence and authoritarianism, arguing that ‘wherever tyranny, fighting, arrogance, swearing, over-assertion are found, they are evidence of a deep sense of inadequacy – a lack of personal self-confidence’.[146] This connection between individual psychology and collective outcomes gave particular urgency to discussions of childhood vulnerability. Hartley described children as ‘representative of the future’, arguing that ‘once you depreciate the child you depreciate all that stands for life and the great achievements of life’.[147] National newspapers published articles about Hartley’s work under headlines such as ‘criminals made in our nurseries’, demonstrating concern about the social consequences of psychological neglect of children’s self-feeling.[148] Protecting children’s self-feeling was framed not simply as a matter of individual welfare but of social stability and democratic governance. Permitting inferiority-feeling was not only cruel but socially irresponsible.

The concept of emotional vulnerability thus extended far beyond individual children to encompass broader questions about the kind of society England was becoming in between the wars. Children’s psychological development was increasingly seen as a national resource requiring careful cultivation, establishing a framework that linked individual emotional health to collective social outcomes. Having established children’s inherent psychological vulnerability, this section proceeds by examining how parents were positioned as emotional guardians responsible for managing these newly recognised risks.

The reconceptualisation of childhood vulnerability implied profound new forms of parental responsibility that extended beyond traditional concerns with physical welfare and moral instruction to emotional management. If children’s self-feeling was both fragile and consequential, then parents bore primary responsibility for protecting and nurturing appropriate self-regard. As May Edginton referenced in her 1931 article, ‘inferiority’ was something that adults could ‘instil’ or alleviate in children, implying their responsibility to avoid this most egregious of offences.[149] This represented a significant departure from earlier childrearing traditions that had emphasised discipline and moral instruction over

[145] Gasquoine Hartley, *Mother and Son*, p.85.
[146] McBride *Inferiority* Complex, p.27.
[147] Gasquoine Hartley, *Mother and Son*, pp.24-25.
[148] Catherine Gasquoine Hartley, ‘Criminals Made in our Nurseries’, *London Daily Chronicle*, 27th June 1922.
[149] Edginton, ‘Inferiority’, pp.70-1.

psychological development. Parents were now expected to become sophisticated managers of their children's emotional development, requiring both technical knowledge and constant vigilance. As Peter Stearns has observed of parenting advice in the US, concerns about children's vulnerability were reflected in literature which increasingly resembled a diverse and growing range 'of protective devices and manipulations' that parents could consult in the interest of their children's wellbeing.[150] With regard to inferiority feeling, these 'manipulations' largely centred on instructions to parents to avoid negative experiences including failure and social comparison.

The new parental responsibilities operated on multiple levels. Most obviously, parents needed to avoid specific behaviours and situations that might trigger inferiority feelings. Hartley advised against drawing comparisons between children, particularly negative ones, and urged parents to accompany any criticism of children's 'defects and incapacities' with recognition of their positive attributes.[151] Children needed encouragement rather than harsh correction, protection from failure rather than exposure to character-building challenges. These interventions would help shield the child from inferiority feelings which were, she argued, 'so frequently inflicted carelessly upon them'.[152] Prominent British psychologist William McDougall advised a similar approach to childrearing in W. J. McBride's pocket handbook on the inferiority complex:

> Almost without exception children need to be encouraged in self-confidence rather than snubbed. Many a child has failed to realise his best potentialities by reason of lack of encouragement, and sometimes a single remark may have long-lasting effects. A mass of unhappiness and a multitude of neurotic troubles arise from too great severity in the reproving of children, unhappiness and troubles which may persist throughout life, rooted in a deep guilt complex.[153]

The idea that children were inherently inferiority-feeling marked a disparity between childrearing advice and education. Progressive educators had been more influenced by the developmental psychology of figures like Jean Piaget which permitted a brief period of natural egocentricity that could be left to disappear with age. For the proponents of new

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[150] Stearns, *Anxious Parents*, p.40.
[151] Gasquoine Hartley, *Mother and Son*, pp.82-3.
[152] Ibid., p.88.
[153] William McDougall, cited in McBride, *Inferiority* Complex, p.18.

psychology as it applied to daily living, children had naturally negative self-regard that needed correcting 'almost without exception'.[154]

Popular advice manuals provided increasingly detailed guidance about these practical interventions. A 1923 article in *Good Housekeeping* magazine instructed mothers to avoid using 'baby talk' when addressing their children, as this was perceived as condescending and likely to foster inferiority feelings.[155] Parents were warned against favouritism, excessive criticism, and any form of interaction that might lead children to develop negative self-evaluations.[156] Some literature conceded that it was unavoidable that children would learn about social and material 'inferiority' but that they should be protected from this for as long as possible. Edington, for example, wrote that the fact of 'actual inferiority' ought to be 'learned slowly and logically with the years, and self-learned at that'.[157] In contrast, *imagined* inferiorities that resulted from ignorant or callous parenting were the result of social comparisons and only served to 'dishearten' children.[158] Similarly, Mary Chadwick noted, having observed children in a nursery school for six months, that favouritism for male children resulted in higher self-confidence among the boys she observed than the girls.[159]

In the face of burgeoning advice about protecting children from inferiority, contemporaries reported a perceptible shift in attitudes towards children. A 'culture of confidence', described in terms of modernity was observed as early as 1926. In the *Daily Mail*, author Mary Betterton linked self-confidence to a distinctly 'modern' and psychology-informed approach to parenting. She observed a cultural shift in attitudes to childrearing among parents whereby they appeared increasingly concerned with nurturing self-confidence in children. Betterton noted the growing importance placed on self-confidence in predicting 'happiness and success', arguing that without a strong sense of self-confidence, skills and knowledge were less likely to be employed effectively. To this end, the author describes a trend towards 'positive' parenting, which was proactive in its goal of 'strengthening' self-confidence and avoided 'depreciation and discouragement', owing to the growing recognition of the long-

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[154] Ibid.
[155] Murial Wrinch 'Baby Talk: Suggestions for Training the Child in the Use of Language', *Good Housekeeping* 3.4 (June 1923), p.44.
[156] Mary Chadwick, 'Six Months' Experiment at a Nursery School', *The Psychoanalytic Review*, 1st January 1928, p.31.
[157] Edginton, 'Inferiority', pp.70-1.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Chadwick, 'Six Months' Experiment', p.31.

term impacts of low self-esteem which could prove 'almost crippling of their mind and character', slowing learning and delaying success.[160]

Hartley's *Mother and Son* embodied this turn to confidence-building as a parental obligation, calling for a fundamental reconceptualisation for parents in how they understood their emotional responsibilities to their children. Hartley positioned herself as authoring 'propaganda' for a fundamental transformation in how parents understood their role.[161] She argued that most parents fundamentally misunderstood their children and what they required, creating an arbitrary and artificial void between adults and children that was 'like that between the civilised man and the savage'.[162] This misunderstanding was not simply unfortunate but dangerous, leaving children emotionally and psychologically vulnerable to lasting damage. John Rickman, writing for parents interested in psychoanalytic approaches to childrearing, mirrored Hartley's call for a fundamental reorientation of the parent-child relationship, and emphasised that success depended on parents' 'general attitude' towards their children, rather than their responses to particular situations.[163] Mary Chadwick's influential work *Difficulties in Child Development* made a similar point, linking parental wellbeing to the emotional health of children. She linked children's emotional wellbeing to the 'psychological instability' of the adults around them. She further argued that parents who were themselves 'jealous', 'over-conscientious', 'sentimental' 'sadistic' or 'silly' were liable to raise 'nervous, frightened' children with damaged self-concepts. The implication was that parents needed to examine and improve their own psychological health before they could adequately support their children's development.[164] This placed a considerable emotional burden on parents who were now required to constantly monitor and modify their own psychological states; in redefining childhood vulnerability, the inferiority complex simultaneously redefined adulthood in terms of its responsibility to protect and emotionally adapt for the sake of the next generation.

There was also a pronounced gendered dimension to these emotional responsibilities and expectations. While fathers were occasionally mentioned in childrearing advice, the primary burden of emotional guardianship fell on mothers. This reflected broader assumptions about women's natural aptitude for emotional work, but also created significant pressure on

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[160] Mary Betterton, 'The Modern Culture of Confidence', *Daily Mail,* 11th November 1926.
[161] Gasquoine Hartley, *Mother and Son*, p.11.
[162] Ibid., pp.17-18.
[163] John Rickman, *On the Bringing Up of Children* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1936), p.xi.
[164] Mary Chadwick, *Difficulties in Child Development* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1928), p.273.

mothers to develop psychological expertise that had not been expected of previous generations. As the title *Mother and Son* suggested, Hartley was particularly concerned about maternal relationships with sons, arguing that mothers' 'love acts as a barrier against [her son's] progress' if not properly managed.[165] The stakes attached to maternal emotional work were made explicit in contemporary discussions. Mothers were warned that their own emotional limitations could have devastating consequences for their children's development. As Hartley put it, without proper maternal attention, children might 'be hurt and hindered' in ways that would 'plant the seed of failure, or unhappiness, even of crime and vice'.[166] This transformation of maternal responsibility was part of the wider 'feminisation' of psychological discourse in the interwar period, but this feminisation came with intensified pressures for women as mothers, who were expected to develop psychological expertise while bearing primary responsibility for their children's emotional wellbeing.[167]

Yet the practical implementation of these new responsibilities proved complex and sometimes contradictory. Parents were expected to build their children's confidence without creating conceit, to protect them from failure without making them unrealistic about their abilities, and to provide emotional support without becoming overprotective. McLellan warned against both 'strict disciplinarian attitude' which could induce inferiority complexes, and the creation of 'spoiled children', accustomed to 'satisfying indulgence' and left 'emotionally unfitted' for life.[168] Parents found themselves navigating between apparently contradictory dangers with limited guidance about achieving the optimal middle ground. This ambivalence about parental effort reflected broader anxieties about 'spoiling' children that became prominent in this period.

Parents were expected to become psychological experts capable of understanding their children's inner lives and responding appropriately to their emotional needs. This required familiarity with psychoanalytic concepts and developmental theories that had only recently emerged from specialist clinical practice. John Rickman insisted that 'parental instinct' was no longer 'a sufficient guide to upbringing', arguing instead that parents needed conscious knowledge based on scientific research to guide their decisions.[169] Parents could no longer rely on intuition or traditional wisdom but needed to educate themselves about child

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[165] Gasquoine Hartley, *Mother and Son*, p.13.
[166] Catherine Gasquoine Hartley, 'Give the Child his Freedom', *Sunday Mirror*, 29th November 1922.
[167] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, pp.47-51.
[168] McBride, *Inferiority Complex*, p.13.
[169] Rickman, *The Bringing Up of Children*, pp.xv-xvi.

development and psychological principles. Hartley, despite her emphasis on 'common sense' was explicit about the inadequacy of parental instincts, particularly criticising 'loving but unintelligent parents' who 'allow children to be hurt and hindered, misunderstood, frightened and their characters prevented from a right unfolding'.[170]

Once the emotional responsibility of ensuring children fostered a positive self-image had been established, allowing inferiority feelings in children was linked overtly to parental neglect or callousness. Those who 'spoilt' their children or approached their children as 'hated and unwanted' were guilty of not fulfilling their emotional obligations to their offspring. In McLellan's *The New Psychology*, self-depreciation and timidity were symptoms of 'being despised and unwanted' in childhood and could result in complete social isolation.[171] For W. J. McBride, the fact that there was a need for a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was indicative that 'hated and unwanted' children was a social issue that could be observed in 'everyday life or reading of the daily papers'.[172]

The emergence of child guidance services provided another platform for the inferiority complex to gain ground in debates about education and childrearing. The Child Guidance Council, formed in 1927, worked to establish clinics supporting children experiencing emotional or behavioural difficulties. These services bridged the gap between home and school, providing specialist support for children whose problems could not be adequately addressed through normal educational or family interventions.[173] As Nelleke Bakker has noted, inferiority complex psychology underpinned clinic work. Child guidance clinics adopted a scientific and interdisciplinary approach where children were tested by psychologists and diagnosed and treated by psychiatrists. To their theoretical basis of psychoanalytic concepts, child guiders added Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology, and its key concept of 'feelings of inferiority' enabled them to explain maladjustment as a result of 'discouragement'.[174]

The transformation of parental responsibility reflected broader social changes reshaping family life in the interwar period. The declining birth rate meant that parents had fewer

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[170] Gasquoine Hartley, *Mother and Son*, p.11.
[171] McLellan, *The New* Psychology, pp.40-1.
[172] McBride, *The Inferiority Complex*, p.17.
[173] Katharina Rowold, 'Child Psychology from Vienna to London: Charlotte Bühler, Concepts of Childhood, and Parenting Advice in Interwar Britain', *History of the Human Sciences* 38.1 (2025), pp.5-6.
[174] Nelleke Bakker, 'Child Guidance, Dynamic Psychology and the Psychopathologisation of Child-rearing Culture (c. 1920-1940): A Transnational Perspective', *History of Education* 49.5 (2020), pp.622-3.

children but invested more emotional energy in each individual child.[175] Rising living standards created both the expectation and possibility of more intensive forms of childcare.[176] The growth of expert knowledge about child development created new standards for parental competence while simultaneously undermining confidence in traditional approaches.[177] In this context, the inferiority complex provided both a framework for understanding new responsibilities and a source of anxiety about the consequences of failure.

Having examined how the inferiority complex was theorised and promoted in childrearing advice, we now consider its reception among parents, teachers and the broader public. Rather than assuming passive acceptance of expert recommendations, this section traces how psychological concepts were actively negotiated, adapted, and contested in popular discourse. The inferiority complex's frequent appearance in national and local newspapers reveals both its penetration into common understanding and the tensions it generated about modern parenting. David Cowan's account of 'modern' parenting in the post-war period reminds us that for working-class parents in particular, the advice of experts was often at the very least 'adapted' according to their own unique circumstances, rather than taken as gospel.[178] Similarly, in his account of parental anxiety in the twentieth century, Peter Stearns warns that historians cannot assume 'some facile equation […] between a cultural artifact and people's real beliefs and behaviours'.[179] As Miller observes in his study of emotional norms around divorce, 'individuals ignore, defy or reject these emotional standards, meaning that actual experiences often differ from social expectations'.[180]

By the early 1930s, the inferiority complex had achieved remarkable cultural visibility. Local and national newspapers regularly featured discussions of the concept in advice columns and features about modern parenting. As Thomson has observed of Bowlbyism in the period after the Second World War, it was rarely through official reports that parents were informed about specific psychological approaches, and were more likely to encounter psychological ideas on the radio or in magazines which translated ideas 'in mediated, diluted form, presented as common sense rather than theory, with considerable 'flexibility' in interpretation.[181] The term 'inferiority complex' appeared across diverse contexts – from debates about education to

[175] Shapira, *The War Inside*, p.6.
[176] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.11.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Cowan, '"Modern" Parenting', p.346.
[179] Stearns, *Anxious* Parents, p.20.
[180] Miller, *Self-Esteem*, p.169.
[181] Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, p.90.

discussions of juvenile delinquency – suggesting it had become a standard framework for understanding psychological difficulties. But mainstream ideas about the inferiority complex were rarely uncontroversial. Alongside enthusiasm around the emerging revelations about the consequences of preserving and protecting self-feeling came ambivalence and outright ridicule at the prospect of shielding children from experiences of failure and humiliation in the hope that this would yield tangible benefits, rather than producing spoilt and conceited adults.

The fact of the concept's popularity generated its own ambivalence and criticism. A 1933 article by headmistress Evelyn Sharp captured growing irritation with parents' casual use of psychological terminology:

> I am a little tired of being warned by the parents of a prospective pupil that their daughter suffers from an inferiority complex; and indeed this particular piece of contemporary jargon does begin to pall when we reflect that it is the common lot of mankind to be born with an inferiority complex, and that the fairy godmother who came uninvited to a christening today would probably make her usual interference with the course of Nature by eliminating the inferiority complex from the unconscious infant. The inferiority complex is the oldest of human disabilities, and the art of living is more or less based upon our success or failure in dealing with it. All that is new is its discovery and exploitation. But is it not sometimes better to let sleeping dogs lie?[182]

Sharp's exasperation reflected broader concerns that psychological concepts were being misused by parents seeking to excuse their children's difficulties or demonstrate their own sophistication.

Similar criticisms appeared throughout the period, reflecting persisting scepticism about psychoanalysis more broadly. A 1922 article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* denounced the dangers of psychoanalysis, which the author saw as particularly popular among women 'who use the jargon of this queer faith as though already it was all-established fact'. The article specifically criticised mothers who diagnosed their children with inferiority complexes instead of recognising simple shyness, arguing that such 'half-truths' were being recklessly transmitted from 'medical men of high repute' to 'young emotional girls and hysterical women'.[183] These

[182] Evelyn Sharp, 'The Sleeping Dog in Education', *The Manchester Guardian*, 9th August 1933.
[183] 'Psycho-analysis Dangers', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 19th October 1922.

criticisms revealed important tensions about the democratisation of psychological knowledge. While experts wanted their insights to reach popular audiences, they were often dismayed by how these ideas were interpreted and applied. The careful distinctions that specialists drew between different psychological phenomena were frequently lost in popular translation, leading to oversimplified interventions.

Parents themselves expressed exasperation about the demands placed on them. Author and suffragist Mary Stocks described in an article in *The Spectator* a new 'science of child treatment' which required parents to avoid any 'indiscretions of domestic existence' in the interest of avoiding the spectre of the 'complex'.[184] Others voiced concerns about the relationship between protecting children's self-concept and permissive behaviour, fearing that excessive protection would produce spoilt children lacking resilience for the realities of life. One commentator in the *London Daily Chronicle* argued that discipline 'may be useful for breaking us into what has to come', challenging advice that seemed to promote a 'horror of discipline'. 'Life' the author argued 'is very wise, wiser even than the psychoanalyst'.[185]

Evidence from oral history interviews reveals how parents negotiated these new expectations in practice. Some sought to strike a balance between building their children's confidence and avoiding conceit. Mr William Finn, who raised children during the interwar period, described his approach as encouraging natural confidence within respectable limits: 'they weren't boastful, but they were pretty sure of themselves'.[186] Similarly, Mrs Ella Carey recalled telling her children during the Second World War: 'always remember that you're as good as anyone else, but you are not better'.[187] These accounts suggest that parents were selectively adopting elements of the inferiority complex discourse while maintaining their own judgements about appropriate child development. They were creating their own synthesis of old and new approaches rather than simply implementing expert recommendations.

By the late 1930s, the inferiority complex had achieved a form of common-sense status in English culture. Rather than representing simple top-down imposition of expert knowledge, its popularisation involved active dialogue between professionals and parents. The resulting hybrid approaches were often more practical and sustainable than original expert

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[184] Mary Stocks, 'For Parents and Teachers', *The Spectator*, 30th December 1932, p.924.
[185] 'The Importance of Beginning', *London Daily Chronicle*, 16th October 1923.
[186] Mr. William Finn, Interview 055 in T. Lummis and P. Thompson, *Family Life and Work Experience Before 1918, 1870-1973*, 7th Edition, UK Data Service SN: 2000.
[187] Mrs. Ella Carey, Interview 027 in H. Newby and P. Thompson, *Families, Social Mobility and Ageing, an Intergenerational Approach, 1900-1988*, UK Data Service, SN: 4938.

recommendations, though they also diluted some of the theoretical nuance that specialists had hoped to preserve. This process of negotiation and adaptation proved crucial to the long-term influence of psychological concepts on English family life. The idea also sustained appeal into the post-war period. A practising psychiatrist writing under a pseudonym in an advice column for the *Liverpool Echo* in 1949 believed that 'if the inferiority complex could be vanquished, some 75 per cent of the world's ills would gradually disappear'. The author cited a range of negative personal attributes associated with an adult who had developed an inferiority complex:

> Men and woman with an inferiority complex make poor neighbours, unsatisfactory marriage partners and frustrated workers. They can (and do) play havoc in the family circle, making other people's lives miserable as well as their own.[188]

The term continued to be employed to describe diverse phenomena. The garish fashion of 'teddy boys' in the 1950s was linked to a need to stand out as a result of inferiority feeling, and it was used to explain poor performances by football teams.[189] The inferiority complex was also part of burgeoning mental health discourse. It was regularly invoked as an explanation – both speculatively and by coroners – for reported suicides in local papers.[190] Inferiority complex was increasingly the psychological justification for death rulings of 'suicide while the balance of mind was disturbed'.[191] This was particularly true in cases of suicide or juvenile delinquency where there was no overt or material explanation for the behaviour – the cheerful and high-achieving student or the youth from an 'excellent family' who had been convicted of a crime. In the case of one young boy who was found guilty of grievous bodily harm, the judge was reported to have spared him prison because of his 'inferiority complex following a case in one eye and a limp brought on by poliomyelitis'.[192] The inferiority complex was one way in which psychoanalysis was able to position itself within discourse of what Shapira calls 'normal mental health' in the post-war period.[193]

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[188] Leonard Weyland, 'That Inferiority Complex', *Liverpool Echo*, 10th May 1949.
[189] 'Bradford Minister Links "Teddies" with Monotonous Jobs', *Bradford Observer*, 28 July 1956; 'Parade of the Teddy Boys: Readers' Platform', *Leicester Evening Mail*, 7th July 1954; 'Was it Inferiority Complex?' *Scotland Sunday Post*, 7th October 1945.
[190] 'Girl's Inferiority Complex' *Gloucestershire Echo*, 21st December 1946.
[191] 'Mother Had an Inferiority Complex', *Buckinghamshire Advertiser*, 27th January 1956.
[192] 'Youth With Inferiority Complex', *South Western Star*, 15th July 1955.
[193] Shapira, *The War Inside*, p.17.

2.3 Inferiority Feeling and Outlook

By the late 1930s, self-feeling was an increasingly prominent topic in discussions related to children, in relation to their schools and in their home lives. Still absent was a clear consensus about children's 'natural' propensity to feel about themselves. In the progressive vision, children were self-aggrandising but freedom and absence of arbitrary discipline could instil meaningful self-worth that prompted cooperation. In the inferiority complex model, children were naturally insecure and self-deprecating. They needed the support of psychologically-savvy parents and teachers to protect them from their emotional tendencies. Neither stance was free from criticism or misunderstanding. The concepts of 'egotism' and 'inferiority complex' were each invoked in contexts far beyond their intended applications.[194]

Within the Board of Education Consultative Committee, the idea of inferiority became influential. The 1931 Hadow Report *Primary Education* explicitly connected educational experiences with inferiority feelings, identifying that 'a growing consciousness of his own inferiority' was 'one of the greatest obstacles to accelerating the progress of the retarded child'. Where much of the psychoanalytical insights used by parenting experts and progressive educators had focused on the young child, the 1931 report framed this kind of inferiority feeling born out of social comparison as a particular problem for the adolescent child, aged eleven or older who experienced an 'increase of self-consciousness that the approach to puberty brings'.[195] This age-based differentiation of self-feeling reflected the growing influence of developmental psychology which posited a shift from egocentrism in young children to social 'decentration' as children reached adolescence.[196] The Board of Education's 1937 *Handbook of Suggestions for Teachers* – written for elementary teachers – argued that streaming children by ability 'has one serious danger', noting that experiences of 'relative failure [...] may already have impressed upon [the child] a sense of their inferiority'. To mitigate this risk, the handbook suggested giving lower-streamed classes 'an attractive name', ensuring less academically successful children had opportunities to 'excel' in other areas, and 'assign[ing] them responsible duties that they are able to carry out'.[197]

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[194] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, p.144. Writing of the interwar and postwar period, Laura Tisdall has described the 'misuse of the term "egotistic"' among teachers in ways that deviated from Piagetian stages of development.
[195] Board of Education Consultative Committee, *The Primary School*, p.90.
[196] Roger Bibace, 'Challenges in Piaget's Legacy', *Integrative Psychological and Behavioural Science* 47.1 (2013), p.171.
[197] Board of Education, *Handbook of Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers and Others Concerned in the Work of Public Elementary Schools* HMSO (1937), p.150.

The Handbook's recommendations reflected a growing sense that academic failure carried psychological consequences extending beyond educational attainment. Teachers were urged to view work with struggling children as 'at least as important' as teaching more able pupils, warning that failure to address inferiority feelings could have serious social consequences:

> To turn such children into contented and useful citizens is not only a more difficult task but it is at least as important. In the past when schools were so organised that these children could not receive the special attention that they need, they too often left school lacking in self-respect and with a sense of inferiority fixed upon them. It is a sufficient comment on this fact that the great majority of those who have come in conflict with the law after leaving school were originally what we now call "C" children.[198]

These warnings reflected a synthesis of progressive approaches that pitted themselves against a traditional, competition-based education with a popular psychoanalysis that positioned adults as the emotional guardians of children's self-feeling. Teachers were increasingly asked to consider not just whether children acquired knowledge and skills, but how educational experiences affected their sense of self and future capacity for social participation.

By the late 1930s, concerns about national character and international competitiveness further complicated the project of emotional citizenship. In 1937, the Board of Education urged that 'modern education must adapt itself to modern needs', citing the likelihood that children would need to 'learn to mix with a greater variety of types of individual than their parents probably knew' and 'accommodate themselves to sudden changes of process and method in the occupations they are likely to take up'.[199] This adaptability requirement reflected growing recognition that 'attitudes of mind are as important as mastery of forms of skill'.[200] Education was no longer seen merely as preparation for known roles but as preparation for an uncertain and rapidly changing world.

The rise of fascism in Europe gave new urgency to concerns about emotional development and self-feeling. As Harry Hendrick has observed, there was a connection frequently drawn between the rise of Nazism and a growing 'antipathy' towards behaviourist modes of parenting which failed to provide an intuitive explanation for childhood aggression which

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[198] Ibid., pp.150-1.
[199] Ibid., pp.11-12.
[200] Ibid., p.13.

was increasingly linked by commentators to the rise of fascism in Europe in the late 1930s.[201] As the Second World War drew close, the idea of inferiority was invoked regularly in psychoanalytical explanations of fascism and Nazism in Germany. Writing in 1938, W.J. McBride linked the inferiority complex to an over-dependence on others, arguing that keeping children dependent for too long contributed both to the prevalence of dictatorships and to a tendency for violence.[202] McBride also reflected on superiority-feeling, comparing the spoiling of children and resulting 'superiority' feeling to the 'present outlook of the German people'.[203]

Reflecting on the domestic situation, McBride also attributed inferiority feeling to a range of social tensions, including class relations and the subordination of women. He referred to a collective inferiority complex among women because of 'the dominance and difference of the boasted male', linking this complex to transgressions of gendered norms including cross-dressing.[204] Elsewhere, the inferiority complex provided a framework for feminists to articulate some of the psychological and emotional ramifications of the social and political subordination of women.[205] These concerns about both inferiority and superiority complexes in intimate and sociopolitical contexts highlighted the delicate balance required in emotional development, suggesting that healthy self-feeling must avoid both deficiency and excess to produce psychologically stable citizens.

This was reiterated by S. G. McLellan in 1939, who used inferiority-feeling to describe national character. The state of 'melancholia' he argued, was rarely observed in Eastern cultures, while the 'average Englishman' had a tendency to feel 'humility'. In a particularly troubling passage, McLellan argued that English humility 'is the price we pay for our civilisation'. Civilisation, he argued, had taken the natural freedom from the English people, leaving them devoid 'of that carefree spirit, so characteristic of an age of less securities, and consequently of greater risks. The savage has no sense of inferiority'.[206] Balanced self-image, which permitted a degree of inferiority-feeling to balance out 'savage' lack of humility was increasingly understood as part of national character. Self-feeling, now shrouded in the language of the inferiority complex, provided language and a relatively accessible

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[201] Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English Society*, p.31.
[202] McBride, *Inferiority* Complex, p.12.
[203] Ibid., p.27.
[204] Ibid., p.26.
[205] Lady Bonham-Carter, 'The Dilemma of Woman's Education', *Good Housekeeping*, 1.5 (July 1922), pp.11-12.
[206] McLellan, *The New* Psychology, p.36.

psychological framework through which commentators could describe social, political, and international tensions. The concept had become a lens through which tensions both at home and abroad could be understood and explained.

2.4 Conclusion

By 1939, as Europe descended into war, children's emotional lives had become an established object of state, pedagogical, and parental concern. Self-feeling more specifically was enshrined in various, competing meanings. Throughout the interwar period uncertainty persisted about how self-feeling naturally manifested in children and how it ought to be managed. A vulnerable, self-deprecating image of the child existed alongside an egotistical, self-centred version. The former needed careful handling and adult intervention, while the latter needed freedom from restrictions and discipline. This duality reflected broader tensions in the progressive movement between freedom and discipline. As Mathew Thomson has argued, psychology – although often controversial – rarely 'line[d] up on the side of a radical experiment' and instead helped carve out 'a middle way' between two extremes.[207] Although concern about self-feeling did not contribute significantly to any utopian redefinition of children or childhood, the 'culture of confidence' felt distinctly 'modern' to contemporaries and was prevalent in both new education and new psychology.[208]

What was less open to debate was the fact that self-feeling was understood to have social implications. Notions of self-feeling were part of emerging anxieties about popular individualism, the status of democracy, and national progress. They were also individualised, encompassing wellbeing and attainment, demonstrating that self-feeling operated at multiple levels in the popular imagination. Concern about children's self-feeling was a new cultural anxiety in interwar England. In contrast to accounts of self-esteem that frame popular preoccupation with self-feeling as modern and homogenous, this was an early moment of popular interest defined not by consensus but by a proliferation of ideas and applications. Self-feeling was simultaneously common sense and a subject of discussion and debate. This reflects what historians have observed of psychology in this period more broadly. Collins has cited popular 'scepticism' that the discipline 'provided anything beyond common sense'.[209]

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[207] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.124.
[208] Betterton, 'The Modern Culture of Confidence'.
[209] Collins, 'England', p.200.

However, as Thomson observes, common sense itself changes over time, a process in which 'psychology had played a crucial role'.[210] The idea that self-feeling had repercussions beyond the self was a new psychologically-informed common sense.

The next chapter explores how self-feeling emerged more explicitly in debates about education in the period after the Second World War. The promise that appropriate attention to children's emotional development could produce psychologically healthy citizens was overshadowed by fears about the consequences of creating spoilt or unrealistic children. The balance between confidence and humility, self-assertion and social responsibility, individual fulfilment and collective obligation remained persistently contested. Ideas about emotional management of children established before the Second World War would not disappear but would evolve and crystallise in the new educational landscape of the post-war period, where concerns about adolescent self-consciousness would provide justification for educational organisation that simultaneously promoted self-esteem whilst institutionalising practices guaranteed to damage it for many.

[210] Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p.126.

3. Self-Feeling and Educational Organisation in Twentieth-Century England

Concerns about children's tendency to inferiority-feeling were sustained in the period after the Second World War and reverberated in educational organisation, policy discourse, and public debate. This chapter takes a chronologically broad view of self-feeling in the twentieth century, tracing how it featured as a key emotional facet of education policy between the 1920s and the 1970s in England. The influence of psychology and emotion in education has been studied in relation to specific theorists, including John Bowlby and Jean Piaget, as well as technologies such as psychometric testing.[1] Less attention has been afforded to psychological concepts in education. This chapter does not refute the centrality of key theorists and technologies to education in the twentieth century, but complements them with attention to self-feeling, which it argues was a subtle but consistent presence in ideas and discourse about educational organisation and purpose. Locating self-feeling within the context of education is significant given Peter Mandler's account of education as 'one of the places where the state enters most regularly and directly into the lives of its citizens. It helps to make us whom we are'.[2] This observation is particularly significant for the mobilisation of self-feeling in policy discourse which framed children as its principal beneficiaries.

The broad chronology of this chapter helps to demonstrate not only the persistence of self-feeling as a concern of policymakers and commentators, but its malleability as a framework for understanding how the state ought to serve the needs of young people. The chapter traces the mobilisation of ideas about self-feeling from the origins of a tripartite, selective system of education that was justified – at least in part – on the basis of protecting non-academic children from damaging social comparisons, rooted in the idea that adolescence was a period of heightened self-consciousness. This idea was later reconfigured by advocates of comprehensive reform, who argued that selective education created precisely the

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[1] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, p.53. Tisdall observes the link between Piagetian developmental psychology and a 'new model of children's physical, intellectual, emotional and social growth' in postwar education.; Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, pp.79-105; Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, pp.67-70.; Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, pp.164-219.

[2] Peter Mandler, 'Education the Nation I: Schools', *Transactions of the RHS* 24 (2014), p.6 cited in Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, p.8.

psychological injuries it claimed to prevent. In this model, self-feeling was incorporated into critiques of social inequality, adding an important emotional dimension to considerations about social and educational discrepancies in educational outcomes. The 1960s witnessed a causal transformation that repositioned self-esteem from a symptom of educational inequality to a potential remedy for it, as educational psychologists experimented with therapeutic approaches that promised to address disadvantage through confidence-building, rather than structural reform. The isolation of self-esteem as an educational aim in its own right brought with it criticism from both the left and the right. Conservative backlash in particular was centred on a new reconceptualisation of self-esteem rooted in notions of merit and deservedness, where self-worth was attached to measurable accomplishment rather than something that was innate. By the end of the 1970s, self-feeling retained a prominent place in policy discourse but was increasingly attached to notions of standards and the individual responsibilities of the child as future worker.

This trajectory should not be taken as a linear movement from tentative idea to popular consensus. Indeed, a key finding is that consensus remained elusive. But self-feeling acted as a consistent factor that policymakers felt compelled to attend to in their work on education. It represents an important but overlooked 'emotional dimension' of post-war reconstruction.[3] Self-feeling provided important psychological and emotional language through which educational trajectories were justified, challenged, and reconstituted in this period. This carried several important implications. Firstly, there was growing appreciation for and attention paid to the idea that social change and individual psychological repercussion could be damaging to national wellbeing. Secondly, self-feeling in post-war England became incorporated into narratives of social inequality, first as a symptom and later – more controversially – as a possible cure. This resulted in new understandings of inequality in the realm of emotion and prompted emotional, remedial educational strategies targeted at specific groups of children increasingly defined by their supposed deficit of self-worth. Finally, self-feeling was increasingly the subject of major political contention. The concept had long been controversial but became a particularly fraught emotional battleground in the debates on education in the 1970s amidst the collapse of post-war consensus – although as Peter Gordon

[3] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.7.

and colleagues observe, any ‘consensus’ in the sphere of education ‘had always been more fragile than in other areas of social policy’.[4]

The long view of this chapter traces self-feeling moving between expert discourse, policy formation and institutional practice. The limitations of a long view mean that specific classroom practice and ordinary experiences of self-feeling are sacrificed for more sweeping policy statements and sentiments, meaning there is little scope here to explore individual encounters with self-feeling discourse. Nevertheless, self-feeling featured prominently in shifting public mood and should not be overlooked in this context. Localised contexts in which self-esteem was deployed as a pedagogical tool are explored in the final two chapters of this thesis.

3.1 The Emotional Logic of Selection

This section explores how interwar psychological concern about inferiority feeling crystallised around adolescence and provided a partial justification for the tripartite educational system implemented after 1944. This analysis seeks to demonstrate that self-feeling sat alongside interest in intelligence testing and administrative efficiency as a justification for educational stratification, transforming what appeared to be social sorting into seemingly compassionate psychological protection. First, the section describes an emerging understanding within the Board of Education’s Consultative Committee, which positioned adolescence as a period of heightened self-consciousness, and later helped justify educational stratification. Secondly, it examines how concern about adolescent vulnerability were sustained in the period after the Second World War, linking self-feeling to notions of democratic citizenship and national reconstruction. Finally, it analyses how the 1943 Norwood Report and subsequent policy on educational reconstruction translated psychological concerns into institutional arrangements that systematically restricted the sources from which different types of children could derive legitimate self-worth. This emotional logic proved remarkably durable precisely because it appeared to address rather than ignore children’s psychological needs, yet it embedded deep contradictions that would eventually generate the very injuries it claimed to prevent.

[4] Peter Gordon, Richard Aldrich and Dennis Dean, *Education and Policy in England in the Twentieth Century* (1991), p.74.

Concern about adolescence as a sensitive period in education predated the Second World War and is evident in the reports of the Board of Education's Consultative Committee in the 1920s and 1930s. The Committee was made up of a chair nominated by the Board, alongside 'not less than two-thirds of persons qualified to represent the views of universities and other bodies interested in education'.[5] It acted as 'the main channel for the gathering of information' within the Board of Education following the establishment of LEAs in 1902. Despite an opaque relationship between the Committee and the Board's policymakers, the Committee produced several reports covering a vast range of educational themes and issues, and as Peter Gordon and colleagues argue, 'had an important bearing on education policy' in the years before the Second World War.[6] Adrian Wooldridge has cited 'the inordinate influence which a handful of psychologists' had over the Committee, as well as its progressive outlook and its role in legitimising and 'popularising' academic psychology in the interwar period as the Committee's notable characteristics.[7]

In this period, secondary education became the main concern of the Committee.[8] This was evident when, in 1924, the Board of Education's Consultative Committee then chaired by Henry Hadow were asked to consider secondary schools and 'the education of the adolescent'.[9] The resulting report, published in 1926, established that primary education would end at the age of eleven, at which point secondary education more suited to the child's needs would be provided. Wooldridge describes the report as 'a turning point in education policy' which encapsulated a series of 'powerful social trends' including 'rising parental expectations' as well as 'demands for a more highly skilled workforce'.[10] Indeed, *The Education of the Adolescent* marked a decisive moment in institutionalising adolescence as an emotionally sensitive life stage within British education policy. Responding to the 1921 Education Act's requirement for improved post-primary instruction, the report conceptualised adolescence as 'a tide which begins to rise in the veins of youth', recognising that around age eleven, children experienced psychological upheavals requiring educational environments that matched their 'evolving interests and self-perception'.[11] Although only one psychologist – Cyril Burt – contributed to the report, there was a distinctly psychological element to the

[5] Ibid., p.23.
[6] Ibid., pp.23-24.
[7] Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, p.238.
[8] Gorden et al, *Education and Policy*, p.54.
[9] Ibid., pp.23-24.
[10] Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, p.224.
[11] Board of Education, *Education of the Adolescent*, p.xix.

break at eleven, linked to the idea that shifts in self-perception were a marker of maturation and development.

The tone of the report was optimistic. The Committee argued that education must 'appeal to those interests and cultivate those powers' if it was to remain 'significant and inspiring' rather than merely 'routine'.[12] In line with the progressive optimism of the period, the 1926 report framed adolescent emotional changes not as problems requiring suppression but as natural tendencies deserving support. Schools should 'transplant' children to 'new ground' where they could 'thrive to a new height and attain a sturdier fibre', suggesting that emerging self-consciousness of adolescents represented potential for meaningful development rather than turbulence requiring management.[13] This was a vision that positioned education as facilitating rather than controlling adolescent emotional expression.

However, as with the education of younger children outlined in the previous chapter, this narrative of promise quickly gave way to anxiety about emotional instability and social disruption. The Committee's 1931 report *The Primary School* described primary education in terms of helping younger children build 'reserves of health to meet the stress of adolescence'.[14] Influenced by the American psychologist Stanley Hall's warnings about adolescent 'perversion', 'juvenile crime' and tendency toward 'exaggeration and excess' in self-feeling, policymakers in England increasingly viewed this developmental phase as requiring careful management rather than simple encouragement. Hall's influential 1904 work *Adolescence* did not feature in the 1926 report about education and adolescence but is cited frequently in the 1931 report. In *Adolescence*, Hall described the period as one in which 'self-feeling is increased'. On one hand, the adolescent experiencing rapid mental and physical development was prone to overestimation and 'a sense of top-loft superiority to the ways and persons of his environment'.[15] On the other, Hall described an 'ebb' that accompanied the 'tide' of superiority:

> The same youth with all his brazen effrontery may feel a distrust of self and a sinking of heart, which all his bravado is needed to hide. He doubts his own powers, is perilously anxious about his future, his self-love is wounded and humiliated in

[12] Ibid., p.75.
[13] Ibid., p.xix; Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, p.32. Although the Hadow Report has been viewed as 'the first coherent progressive programme', Laura Tisdall emphasises the extent to which utopian progressivism was 'excluded' from this vision.
[14] Board of Education, *The Primary School*, p.xvi.
[15] G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), pp.79-80.

> innumerable ways keenly felt, perhaps at heart resented, but with a feeling of impotence to resist. The collapsing moods bring a sense of abasement and humiliation, which sometimes seems like a degree of complacency to all that comes, suggesting spiritlessness. Youth often fears itself lacking in some essential trait of manhood or womanhood, or wanting the qualities of success. He is often vanquished in innumerable rivalries and competitions that now make so much of life, and loses heart and face. The world seems all the more hopeless because of the great demands which the opposite mood has imposed. Sometimes a sense of shame from purely imaginary causes is so poignant as to plunge the soul for a time into the deepest and most doleful dumps; fancied slights suggest despair, and in place of wonted self-confidence there is a retiring bashfulness, which no coaxing or encouragement of friends can overcome or fathom, and which may express itself only in some secret diary or perhaps in prayer.[16]

Echoed in the 1931 Hadow report, the Committee explained that as children approached puberty, they became more likely to draw comparisons with peers, experiencing 'heightened consciousness of self' alongside increased 'social feeling'.[17] For 'normal' children, this balance represented healthy development, but for children who frequently failed in school, self-consciousness could induce damaging inferiority feelings requiring intervention through 'placing him when he is older with those who are on a level that more nearly corresponds with his own'.[18] This emotion-based logic would prove significant to later justifications of streaming and selection.

In 1934, former vice chancellor of the University of Cambridge Will Spens replaced Henry Hadow as chair of the Consultative Committee.[19] In 1938 the Committee published its final report, returning to the theme of secondary education. The Spens Report represented the culmination of interwar psychological thinking about adolescent emotional vulnerability, providing the most psychologically-informed framework yet developed for understanding how self-consciousness created educational challenges. As Adrian Wooldridge has observed, the Spens report represented a 'climax' of the influence of psychologists on the Board of Education's Consultative Committee, with contributions from prominent psychologists like

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[16] Ibid., p.80.
[17] Board of Education, *The Primary School*, p.279.
[18] Ibid., p.90.
[19] Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, p.236.

Cyril Burt and Percy Nunn, as well as the National Institute of Industrial Psychology.[20] In the report, the Committee invoked psychological evidence extensively to describe 'two types of pupil': those who excelled in intellectual learning, and those more suited to a practical education.[21] In so doing, it provided much of the ideation for a tripartite system of education that would be taken up in the 1940s. John Lawson and Harold Silver described 'overconfident psychological evidence' that seemed to confirm that at the age of eleven, education needed to suit the needs of different children, separate both by age and by ability.[22] Just as the Hadow report had described changes at eleven that necessitated a separate secondary education, the Committee under Spens marked eleven as the age 'when certain qualitative changes in the child's personality […] become noticeable'.[23]

The Spens Report characterised adolescence as a whole as involving 'strong intensification of emotional energy' that could produce 'mental disorganisation as a temporary result', requiring careful adult guidance to ensure healthy resolution.[24] Whilst acknowledging that 'self-assertive impulses' might resemble 'pugnacity' requiring sympathetic management, the report devoted considerable attention to 'self-submissive' tendencies that left young people vulnerable to 'fresh fears, fresh sorrows, a new sense of inferiority' producing 'moods of depression'.[25] It echoed the idea that adolescent self-consciousness created vulnerability to social comparison with lasting psychological consequences, warning that adolescents became 'sensitive to criticism and [were] often their own severest critic', whilst social interaction 'continually brought home to them their social potentialities, both good and bad'.[26] The pressure to meet 'external standards' could, the report argued, result in decline or 'disappearance' of interest and talent, providing the foundation for arguments that adolescents required protection from academically competitive environments where they might experience failure and develop chronic inferiority feelings.[27] The report urged that teachers 'be on the watch for symptoms of these depressive emotions', encouraging them to 'take appropriate steps to prevent children from becoming unduly shy, reticent, awkward and even

[20] Ibid.
[21] Gordon et al, *Education and Policy*, p.59.
[22] John Lawson and Harold Silver, *A Social History of Education in England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1973), p.416.
[23] Board of Education Consultative Committee, *Secondary Education with Special Reference to Grammar Schools and Technical High Schools*, HMSO (1938), p.389.
[24] Ibid., p.137.
[25] Ibid., pp.135-6.
[26] Ibid., pp.137-8.
[27] Ibid.

neurotic'.[28] This was reiterated to teachers in the 1937 edition of the Board of Education's *Handbook of Suggestions for Teachers* which warned them that adolescents' 'greater independence' was accompanied by intense self-consciousness, characterised by tension between 'self-assertion and self-distrust', requiring schools to direct 'the child's natural feelings and impulses into proper channels' to prevent 'undesirable forms of social behaviour'.[29]

By integrating concerns about social comparison into policy discourse about educational selection, the Spens report helped set the stage for educational interventions designed to help children avoid these psychologically damaging episodes, purportedly in the interest of psychological wellbeing. The report's treatment of different types of adolescent emotional response revealed emerging assumptions about which children could cope with competitive pressure. Ideas about differential vulnerability would later be invoked to justify the idea that different types of children required fundamentally different educational environments to protect their psychological wellbeing. Emotional considerations sat alongside other stratifiers like intelligence as justifications for separate treatment in education. On the eve of the Second World War, education policy discourse contained an assumption that adolescent self-consciousness created particular vulnerabilities requiring institutional response. The psychological framework developed through successive reports positioned protection from damaging social comparisons as important, creating the foundation for post-war arguments that educational separation served children's emotional wellbeing, rather than merely fulfilling administrative needs.

The Second World War proved something of a disjuncture for concern about self-feeling – perhaps unsurprising given a return to concern about children's material wellbeing, as well as the physical condition of schools in wartime.[30] There was an intentional departure from the influence of psychologists that had characterised the reports of the Consultative Committee. The appointment of an 'ad hoc' committee known as the Secondary Schools Examinations Council in 1943 'dealt a body blow' to the psychologists who had previously enjoyed significant and, Wooldridge argues, disproportionate influence on educational policy

[28] Ibid., pp.361-2.
[29] Board of Education, *Handbook of* Suggestions, p.128.
[30] Chettiar, *The Intimate* State, pp.6-7. Teri Chettiar records that 'nine-tenths' of the Beveridge Report which outlined the welfare state was 'dedicated to eliminating "want"' and was focused on poverty, although Chettiar stresses the breadth of the vision that included 'an emotional dimension'.

discourse.[31] Its report, *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools,* rejected the influence of psychologists, preferring a 'Christian interpretation of life' over one 'dictated by the provisional findings of special sciences'.[32]

Significantly less attention to self-feeling was evident in this report. It was commissioned to counter growing hostility to the notion of tripartite education and to put forward arguments in defence of selective Grammar schools.[33] Subsequently, the report echoed earlier arguments for a tripartite system of education based on unsupported assertions about intelligence and aptitude. The Council put forward what it termed 'rough groupings' of children to reconcile individual differences with administrative practicality.[34] These groupings would meet the needs of children who, the authors argued, needed 'the nurture suited for individual growth rather than of coercion into a mould'.[35] The pupil destined for a university education was 'interested in learning for its own sake' and could 'take a long view and hold his mind in suspense'.[36] The technically-minded pupil 'may have unusual or moderate intelligence' best suited to direct application, while the third group were characterised by ability 'along one line of study' while 'abstractions' and 'ideas' were of little interest.[37]

Based on these categories, the report echoed the objectives of the Board of Education when it argued for an expansive understanding of secondary education that encompassed a specific education designed for each 'type' of pupil.[38] Shortly before the Norwood Report was published, the government issued a White Paper on *Educational Reconstruction* that set out this new tripartite system of secondary education whereby children would attend one of 'three main types of schools to be known as grammar, modern and technical'.[39]

After 1945, with the arrival of a Labour government, attention turned once again to the role self-feeling played in education, and more specifically, how concern for self-feeling could act as an apparently compassionate justification for tripartism. For two decades, the official policy of tripartism would be the subject of significant debate, but faced with a growing number of school pupils, 'continuity' in approach was favoured by successive Ministers of

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[31] Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, p.239.
[32] Board of Education Committee of the Secondary School Examinations Council, *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools,* HMSO (1943), p.x.
[33] Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, p.240.
[34] Board of Education, *Curriculum and Examinations*, p.2.
[35] Ibid., p.56.
[36] Ibid., p.2.
[37] Ibid., p.3
[38] Ibid., p.139.
[39] Board of Education, *White Paper: Educational Reconstruction*, HMSO (1943), p.8.

Education.[40] Self-feeling in this period became a way of explaining the need for differential educational paths. As Teri Chettiar has argued, concern for children's emotional and psychological health was central to 'political planning for Britain's future' by 1945.[41] Significantly, this concern did not challenge the emotional logic developed during the interwar period but rather amplified it, linking self-feeling more explicitly to democratic citizenship and national progress whilst embedding psychological arguments within broader anxieties about modernity and social stability. Despite the wartime disjuncture, self-feeling continued as a theme of interest in post-war educational reconstruction.

In 1945, Labour set out its vision of tripartism in the new Ministry of Education's first pamphlet titled *The Nation's Schools.* The document faced significant backlash and Minister of Education Ellen Wilkinson was forced to withdraw the pamphlet. But with pressure also from policy officials, the same policy was reiterated two years later in a pamphlet titled *The New Secondary Education.*[42] *The Nation's Schools* made little reference to self-feeling, although it argued that secondary schools should be 'free from examination pressure', enabling pupils to 'advance along the lines they themselves feel to be right'.[43] It also established a 'unity of purpose' among secondary schools in developing pupils who would 'feel some confidence in their growing powers' and possess 'that sense of self-respect which, whatever his work, impels the possessor to give to it the best that he has to give'.[44] Educational separation was thus framed at least in part as serving rather than undermining children's emotional development. In 1947, *The New Secondary Education* developed these arguments further and placed greater emphasis on protecting self-conscious, 'dull' pupils from 'discouragement' while ensuring they could attain a 'sense of achievement' within a more limited educational environment. This revealed how emotional governance could be designed through apparently compassionate educational arrangements that simultaneously restricted children's aspirations to predetermined social boundaries.[45] The pamphlet insisted that 'no child must be forced into an academic education which bores it to rebellion,' presenting predetermined educational limitation as psychological necessity whilst emphasising that such pupils should 'attain this sense of achievement which is a crucial factor

[40] Gordon et al, *Education and Policy*, pp.181-2.
[41] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.3.
[42] Ministry of Education, *The Nation's Schools: Their Plan and Purpose*, HMSO 1 (1945).
[43] Ibid., p.21.
[44] Ibid., pp.12-13.
[45] Ministry of Education, *The New Secondary Education*, HMSO 9 (1947), p.42.

in the development of their personality'.[46] Self-feeling sat alongside ideas about interest, intellect and aptitude as a justification for a tripartite system, even in the face of significant opposition among Labour Party members, testament to the growing emotion-oriented impulses of post-war reconstruction that were not simply politically malleable but potentially powerful.

This tripartite vision was set out in the context of wider interest in self-feeling as a facet of democratic citizenship in the modern world. After 1945, assumptions about the need for systematic emotional management found their most explicit articulation in reports that positioned self-esteem as essential for navigating modern society. Following the 1944 Education Act, the Central Advisory Council for England (CACE) replaced the Consultative Committee. In 1947, its first report *School and Life* explicitly positioned self-esteem as an essential resource for adapting to post-war society, warning that individuals increasingly felt like 'cogs in some huge impersonal machine' where 'the ordinary man finds it increasingly difficult to discover either a purpose in his work or a meaning in his existence'.[47] Adolescent emotional development was linked directly to broader social challenges of reconciling the self in a rapidly changing society, suggesting that without adequate self-confidence, young people would be vulnerable to 'disillusioned apathy, or breakdown and revolt'.[48] The report's treatment of adolescent self-assertiveness revealed how psychological concerns had evolved since the interwar period. Where earlier reports had viewed adolescent confidence with cautious optimism, *School and Life* adopted a distinctly negative appraisal of 'aggressiveness and self-assertiveness' in young people, describing these as 'symptoms of a maladjustment which it is the community's business to diagnose, and then to cure'.[49] This decisive tonal shift reflected a growing conviction that adolescent emotional energy required not just guidance but active therapeutic intervention to prevent social disruption.

In 1949, the Ministry of Education published a pamphlet titled *Citizens Growing Up* which made the connection between individual emotional development and collective wellbeing explicit once again. The pamphlet presented self-confidence as fundamental to democratic participation, arguing that homes and schools must foster children's 'sense of personal agency and value' through 'love, patience and understanding, and, built on these, a firm and

[46] Ibid., p.4.; p.42.
[47] Ministry of Education Central Advisory Council for Education (England), *School and Life: A First Enquiry into the Transition from School to Independent Life*, HMSO (1947), p.82.
[48] Ibid., p.57.
[49] Ibid.

stable system of human values'.[50] Individual growth was tethered to the building of a just and moral society, ensuring that psychological development served rather than challenged existing social arrangements. Experience of war had intensified concerns about adolescent vulnerability whilst embedding these anxieties within broader questions about modernity, democracy, and social stability. These concerns provided a theoretical and emotional justification for post-war educational arrangements that would systematically restrict the sources from which different types of children could derive legitimate self-worth, transforming psychological protection into institutional stratification.

By the 1950s, this approach was systematically extended through official guidance on practical subjects. A 1950 Ministry of Education pamphlet on *Reading Ability* warned that 'duller children' were vulnerable to 'discouragements in any kind of school where they are in the company of those who are much more able', noting how exposure to academically eager peers could culminate in 'a sense of inferiority' in the apparently less capable children.[51] This emotional vulnerability was treated as permanent rather than remediable, requiring carefully managed environments where academic failure could be avoided and alternative forms of achievement cultivated.

A 1952 pamphlet on metalwork argued that 'educationally retarded pupils' could be 'reclaimed by sympathetic teaching in a workshop where self-assurance emerges from even trivial accomplishment', explicitly recommending that 'the development of self-confidence should be the basis of the whole scheme of instruction' for such children.[52] The emphasis on 'trivial accomplishment' revealed how children's self-worth was being anchored to achievements deemed appropriate to their perceived limited capabilities rather than genuine educational advancement. Compensatory approaches reflected systematic assumptions about how educational arrangements could manage the sources of children's self-worth whilst legitimating stratified provision through apparently compassionate psychological intervention. Crucially, the alternative achievements offered to secondary modern pupils were overwhelmingly manual and practical in nature – metalwork, woodwork, domestic tasks – implicitly preparing working-class children for expected life trajectories whilst ensuring their sense of personal worth remained tied to physical rather than intellectual accomplishments.

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[50] Ministry of Education, *Citizens Growing Up: at Gome, in School and After*, HMSO 16 (1949), p.11.
[51] Ministry of Education, *Reading Ability*, HMSO 18 (1950), pp.20-1.
[52] Ministry of Education, *Metalwork in Secondary Schools*, HMSO 22 (1952), p.21.; p.27.

Self-confidence was carefully cultivated within predetermined social boundaries that aligned emotional development with the child's anticipated future prospects. A 1958 pamphlet on teaching mathematics advocated using vocational relevance for secondary modern pupils, arguing that career-linked learning would 'strengthen their progress and their self-confidence,' particularly helping 'the better pupil, who may feel disappointed in not being in a Grammar School' find motivation rather than 'drift'.[53] This positioning of confidence as the crucial mediating factor between ability and achievement revealed how emotional governance operated to contain working-class aspirations within acceptable limits.

The intellectual trajectory of educational psychologist James Hemming during this period reveals the extent to which fears about inducing inferiority feeling underpinned approaches to education. It also suggests interventions were developed on the basis of assumptions about from where and to what extent different types of children were capable of developing a sense of self-confidence. Despite his 1947 critique of the eleven-plus examination's detrimental impact on children's self-confidence, by the early 1950s Hemming had begun advocating that teachers could remedy lack of confidence by enabling 'slow learners' to 'work at an appropriate level that enabled them to keep moving forward', ensuring they experienced success relative to their capabilities rather than in comparison with more able peers. Teachers were also encouraged not to use labels like 'backwards' to describe these children, and Hemming linked children's misbehaviour to failure of adults to attend to the child's 'desperate determination to protect its self-esteem'. This positioned educators as responsible for creating environments where different types of children could derive self-worth from appropriate sources.[54] In Hemming's vision, to deny children 'the means to self-esteem' was deemed 'barbarous', but crucially, this protection required matching children's experiences to their predetermined capabilities rather than challenging structural limitations.[55]

The extent to which ideas about self-feeling had been naturalised by the middle of the twentieth century was evident in how some teachers themselves had internalised and reproduced emotional arguments for educational stratification. A late 1950s survey by the London Head Teachers' Association found that schools routinely justified streaming on psychological grounds, citing the need to protect 'backward' children from 'the feeling of inferiority' whilst providing encouragement and intellectual 'stretching' for more able

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[53] Ministry of Education, *Teaching Mathematics in Secondary Schools*, HMSO 36 (1958), pp.111-2.
[54] 'Problem of the Slow Learner', *Cambridge Daily News*, 18th February 1954.
[55] Hemming and Balls, *The Child is* Right, p.144.

pupils.[56] These findings were replicated in Brian Jackson's 1964 study for the Institute of Community Studies, which asked fifty teachers their opinions on streaming. Sixteen teachers felt that streaming functioned 'to ensure that bright children were not held back,' whilst eleven believed it 'was not designed for the gifted child but rather to protect and help the backward.'[57] A section of the teaching profession had come to see psychological protection as their professional responsibility, positioning confidence as the crucial mediating factor between ability and achievement. The assumption that different types of children possessed fundamentally different emotional characteristics requiring appropriate educational responses had become so embedded that alternative approaches appeared psychologically harmful rather than socially progressive.

The 1959 Ministry of Education publication *Primary Education* demonstrated how far this thinking had developed, suggesting that emotional factors might be more significant than supposedly fixed intellectual capacity. The document urged that experiencing confidence could help children 'use even meagre talents' to reach unexpected levels of achievement, whilst warning that those left 'bewildered or disheartened' by school work would be destined to limited capabilities.[58] Crucially, this framing implied that talent itself might be constrained by emotional factors rather than predetermined intellectual capacity, yet this insight was deployed to justify continued streaming rather than question the fundamental assumptions underlying educational separation.

The 1963 Newsom Report – commissioned to examine the education of adolescents with average or below-average ability – continued the postwar trend of preserving self-esteem within prescribed aspirational limits. It warned against misleading such children 'into thinking that they are acquiring qualifications for a skilled trade which they have no prospect of obtaining'.[59] This suggested that self-esteem building should remain within predetermined social boundaries rather than challenging existing hierarchies. It mirrored earlier ideas about 'backward' children obtaining self-esteem through less impressive endeavours, calling for more emphasis on practical subjects, not just to ensure that pupils experience a sense of achievement and 'mastery', but because they permit 'light-hearted experiments which are not

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[56] J. E. Brown, 'Junior School Streaming: A Survey', *Forum* 1.1 (1958), pp.20-1.
[57] Brian Jackson, 'Teachers' Views on Primary Streaming', *Educational Research* 4.1 (1961), p.49.
[58] Ministry of Education, *Primary Education: Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers and Others Concerned with the Work of Primary Schools*, HMSO (1959), p.72.
[59] Ministry of Education Central Advisory Council for Education (England), *Half Our Future*, HMSO (1963), pp.34-5.

regarded as tragedies if they go wrong'.[60] It also promoted record-keeping by teachers which permitted individual, rather than social, comparisons by which to measure progress and ensure that individual pupils were recognised as achieving against their own trajectories, rather than those of their peers.[61] The report promoted this 'individuality of experience' which ensured that 'weaker pupils' could continue to enjoy 'associations with abler companions, without being in competition with them'.[62] The idea that different children derived self-confidence from different things was extended to its discussion of physical education as a means of confidence-building. The authors noted that those activities 'are not a source of enjoyment or of self-esteem for all pupils' and if forced into them, may have the inverse impact on their self-image.[63]

In the two decades after the Second World War, self-feeling had become thoroughly embedded within British educational policy discourse, particularly within arguments justifying the separate and different treatment of different 'types' of children. The tripartite system that was established after 1944 represented not merely administrative convenience but a comprehensive emotional architecture that systematically redefined what different types of children could legitimately expect from their educational experiences. Grammar school pupils were reconceptualised as naturally resilient and competitive, capable of thriving in academically demanding environments, whilst secondary modern pupils were reframed as emotionally vulnerable beings requiring protection from damaging social comparisons. This emotional logic appeared compassionate – teachers were encouraged to protect 'backward' children from psychological injury – yet it fundamentally constrained certain children's access to intellectual achievement whilst presenting these limitations as psychological necessity rather than social stratification. The result was an educational system that claimed to serve children's psychological needs whilst systematically restricting their aspirations, establishing self-feeling as both justification for and mechanism of social reproduction. Yet this very institutionalisation of self-feeling within education discourse would soon generate the conditions for its own critique, as the psychological framework designed to protect children from damaging social comparisons increasingly appeared to create the very injuries it purported to prevent.

[60] Ibid., p.129.
[61] Ibid., p.144.
[62] Ibid., p.239.
[63] Ibid., p.138.

3.2 The Emotional Case Against Selection

By the 1950s, there was widespread recognition that one of the tripartite system's foundational promises – creating 'parity of esteem' between different educational pathways – had manifestly failed. Institutional separation seemed to reproduce, rather than repair, existing social hierarchies.[64] Despite official rhetoric about the equivalent value of grammar, technical, and secondary modern schools, the reality of parental preferences, employer attitudes, and social perceptions quickly established a clear hierarchy that fundamentally undermined the psychological justifications for selection. The 1959 Crowther Report documented overwhelming parental preference for grammar schools, reflecting widespread recognition that secondary modern education represented inferior provision despite official claims about its distinctive value.[65] The eleven-plus examination had become, in practice, a mechanism for allocating children to institutions with markedly different social status. Rather than rejecting the emotional logic of selection based on self-feeling, reformers re-claimed or appropriated the same psychological discourse to advance a comprehensive vision of education. By 1967, the Plowden report cited the failure of successive administrations to realise a 'parity of esteem' between types of school in the tripartite system which had resulted, according to witnesses, in 'a sense of failure' in pupils which schools were tasked with remedying.[66] From the late 1940s, critics began arguing that mixed-ability institutions would provide richer and more authentic emotional experiences than the carefully managed but ultimately hierarchical arrangements of selective education. The malleability of self-esteem thinking became particularly evident as progressive educators demonstrated how the same psychological principles could support radically different institutional arrangements, positioning comprehensive reform not simply as social justice but as psychological necessity for fostering healthy emotional development in democratic communities.

Opposition to selection was evident within the Labour Party, where Labour politicians were often 'paid-up meritocrats' and favoured selection, but 'opinion was more divided in the rank-and-file'.[67] At the 1947 party conference, delegates put forward a motion against the

[64] Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, pp.259-60.
[65] Ministry of Education Central Advisory Council for Education (England), *15 to 18*, HMSO (1959), p.87.
[66] Department of Education and Science Central Advisory Council for Education (England), *Children and Their Primary Schools*, HMSO (1967), p.153.
[67] Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, p.256.

'undemocratic traditions' associated with the tripartite structure.[68] In 1950, a resolution was passed at the party meeting in Margate which called for the Government 'to implement the Labour Party's declared policy of the comprehensive school'.[69] A report was subsequently commissioned on secondary education. The publication of *A Policy for Secondary Education* in 1951 presented a comprehensive psychological case against the eleven-plus examination.[70] The Labour document used some of the same emotional discourse that had justified educational separation, demonstrating how concerns about children's self-regard could be mobilised to support opposing institutional arrangements. It framed the eleven-plus examination not as a neutral sorting mechanism but as a systematic source of emotional trauma that violated children's psychological welfare. The report argued that 'the child who is anxious to be selected but who fails the test, feels his failing deeply', and that this sense of failure was compounded 'by his parents' natural concern at his failure'.[71] Segregation, it argued, left 'some children resentfully concluding that they are inferior to children attending the grammar schools'.[72] This contrasted with the emotional logic of proponents of the tripartite system, suggesting that competitive selection procedures were generating precisely the widespread inferiority feeling that educational separation had promised to prevent. By positioning self-feeling as a casualty of selective education, Labour critics established psychological damage alongside social inequality in arguments against the eleven-plus.

Psychologists also weighed in to debates about the impact of testing and segregated schooling on children's self-feeling. In 1947, child psychologist and educator James Hemming and nursery instructor Josephine Balls published a parenting advice manual titled *The Child is Right*. The book was commended by the *Times Educational Supplement* for its accessible account of child psychology 'refreshingly free of jargon and technicalities'.[73] It was designed as an 'intimate book', focused on 'the close, personal relationships' between parents and children, but also dedicated space to the subject of 'children at school'.[74] Hemming was particularly concerned with the self-esteem of children. A vehement critic of corporal punishment, he argued that 'the imposition of force destroys self-esteem'.[75] Hemming was

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[68] Derek Gillard, 'Labour and the Tripartite System', *Education in the UK* <https://www.education-uk.org/history/chapter10.html> [accessed 15 February 2022].
[69] The Labour Party, *A Policy for Secondary Education*, (1951), p.2.
[70] Gillard, 'Labour and the Tripartite System'.
[71] The Labour Party, A Policy for Secondary Education, p.7.
[72] Ibid., p.5.
[73] Hemming and Balls, *The Child is Right*, cover.
[74] Ibid., p.122.
[75] Ibid., p.125.

distinctive in his argument that selection was also detrimental to pupils selected for grammar schools, despite the sense of achievement selection ought to have been accompanied with. He described that teachers at grammar schools 'lament the disastrous slump in brains and vitality' that occurred in the years following the eleven plus examination. He described the children who passed the test entering school 'keen, lively, bright as buttons. […] Proud of being selected for the school. Their sense of self-esteem, their confidence, and their zest for life run high.' However, two years in, as a result of restrictive curricula that provided no 'general outlet for […] general intelligence', some of the same children 'are in various stages of despondency, and are busy trying to compensate by any means to hand for a deep feeling of failure'.[76] 'Psychiatrists', Hemming went on, 'testify to the disastrous injury that such experience of failure does to a child'.[77]

Educational observers reported systematic patterns of anxiety, damaged self-confidence, and distorted primary school experiences that suggested selection procedures were psychologically harmful rather than protective. These emerged in publications like *Forum*, a journal founded in the late 1950s and dedicated to the issue of comprehensive educational reform. It was edited by two progressive academics of education based in Leicester: Brian Simon and Robin Pedley.[78] In a 1959 edition of *Forum* one teacher wrote of her experience teaching 28 girls in a class who had been labelled 'backward' as a result of 'IQ and attainment figures'. The teacher noted that 'the 11 plus had left its mark', resulting in disillusionment and behavioural problems in her class. As a first port of call, she set about 'establish[ing] confidence' as 'the first priority'. She allocated 'form jobs' to each girl, giving each pupil 'a chance […] to work and prove herself a valuable member of the school community'.[79]

Similarly, another commentator writing on secondary modern schools highlighted the benefits and drawbacks of examination at a young age, noting that for some children examinations 'represent a tangible aim' which could stave off 'academic aimlessness' or act 'as a stimulus for a desirable reaction', but for others – the majority – 'it is crushing and depressing to a degree which no one has ascertained'.[80] Echoing widespread concerns about

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[76] Ibid., p.134.
[77] Ibid., p.136.
[78] Roy Lowe, *The Death of Progressive Education: How Teachers Lose Control of the Classroom* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p.44.
[79] June Partington, 'Experiences With a Backward Class', *Forum* 1.3 (1959), p.82.
[80] Cyril Rapstoff, 'Bi-Polarity in the Secondary Modern School', *Forum* 2.3 (1960), p.98.

the consequences of negative self-image, the author argued that the consequences of this inducement of inferiority feeling would be far-reaching and expensive:

> If "academic aspirations" in the modern school are going to shriek to the dull or backward the word "Failure", we shall be paying in the streets, cafes, remand homes, borstal institutions and the prisons.[81]

Despite 'inconclusive' findings by psychologist Philip Vernon and the British Psychological Society in a 1957 inquiry into the relationship between mental 'strain' and the eleven plus examination, interest in the relationship remained high.[82]

In the middle of the twentieth century, educational reformers had begun reframing self-feeling from a characteristic requiring careful management through institutional separation into a fundamental right being systematically violated by selective education. This transformation positioned emotional welfare not as justification for educational hierarchy but as an argument for comprehensive reform, demonstrating how the same psychological concerns could support radically different conclusions about educational organisation. The centrality of self-feeling to these debates ensured that discussions about educational structure necessarily became arguments about the state's responsibility for protecting emotional as well as academic development.

The conversation about de-streaming continued into the 1960s. In 1966, *Forum* held a conference on the topic, attended by more than 400 people.[83] One year later, David Hargreaves published a groundbreaking ethnographic study of a secondary modern school which provided unprecedented access to pupils' own perspectives on how streaming influenced their self-feeling and social interactions. The study ultimately linked experiences of segregation and streaming to the emergence of a 'deliquescent subculture' among working-class youth.[84] The study used pupil interviews to counterbalance the 'dry, static tables' of quantitative analysis. Hargreaves spoke to pupils in the highest and the lowest stream classes and demonstrated 'how rare' it was for these pupils – separated by categories of ability – 'to become friends'. Hargreaves cited the prevalence of 'stereotypes' and 'negative attitudes' between boys in each stream.[85] Boys in the higher sets labelled boys in the lower sets

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[81] Ibid.
[82] Department of Education and Science, *Children and Their Primary Schools*, p.153.
[83] Lowe, *Death of Progressive Education*, p.51.
[84] Hargreaves, *Social Relations in a Secondary* School, cited in Lowe, *Death of Progressive* Education, p.51.
[85] Hargreaves, *Social Relations in a Secondary School*, pp.61-2.

'scruffy' and 'dumb' and could ignore boys in the lower sets. For the boys in the lower sets, they had more interaction with those from higher sets who were more likely to be school prefects. Hargreaves noted that for these boys 'to be so scornfully ignored by the A and B boys increased the C and D boys' sense of inferiority. It was a common source of complaint'.[86] These testimonies demonstrated that children were acutely aware of the social and emotional hierarchies created by educational separation, experiencing streaming not as protection from damaging comparisons but as a systematic source of psychological injury that shaped aspects of their school lives.

Pupils in lower streams consistently reported that streaming created profound divisions in the school community that were understood primarily in emotional rather than academic terms. Boys in the lowest sets described how their encounters with higher-stream pupils were characterised by deliberate psychological humiliation that reinforced feelings of inferiority. One pupil explained:

> They don't speak to you or owt in 4A. They just don't let on to you. They just look at you, you know. Just 'cos they're in a higher class. I feel like smashing them sometimes. They snub you and all that. You know, they just walk right past you.[87]

This testimony revealed how streaming functioned as an emotional sorting system that taught children to understand their educational placement in terms of personal worth and social status, creating precisely the kind of damaged self-regard that the tripartite system had claimed to prevent through careful institutional separation.

The children's accounts demonstrated a keen awareness of how streaming influenced self-feeling and social behaviour across different groups. Lower-stream pupils consistently characterised their higher-achieving peers as 'snobby' and 'conceited', understanding academic success as inevitably corrupting children's emotional authenticity and social relationships. As one boy observed:

> They're snobby in 4A. There are some lads who used to go to our Junior School but now they're up there they don't look at you. […] There are a lot of snobby ones that won't talk to you. […] They're in a high class and they think they can boss everyone around. If you walk past them and say summat they just ignore you.[88]

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[86] Ibid., p.63.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid., p.64.

Children thus understood streaming as creating distinct emotional identities, with academic achievement associated with arrogance and social superiority – rather than simply reflecting difference in aptitude or ability.

Pupils recognised that their placement in educational hierarchies was understood by others as a reflection of their fundamental personal worth rather than their academic achievement. Another pupil explained: 'Just 'cos they're in a higher class than us they think they're *better* than us. They are in a way, but they don't need to stick their necks out do they?'[89] The complex psychological negotiations children were required to make in encountering the intersection of self-feeling and educational segregation saw them simultaneously acknowledging the apparent legitimacy of educational hierarchies whilst resenting their emotional consequences. It demonstrated how deeply children had internalised the assumption that academic placement reflected inherent personal value, even as they recognised the social injustice of this arrangement.

The pupils' responses also revealed how streaming influenced their relationships with authority figures, creating systematic differences in how teachers interacted with pupils from different educational levels. One lower-stream pupil complained:

> I just don't like them getting treated better than us, you know what I mean? [The teachers] call them by their first names and they just treat us as though we're not there.[90]

For some children, streaming created not merely academic differentiation but fundamental differences in emotional recognition and social membership within the school community. Children understood that their educational placement determined not only their access to academic opportunities but their status as valued members of the school community, positioning self-feeling as central to experiences of social citizenship.

Hargreaves also documented how children's awareness of streaming's emotional consequences led them to actively resist educational mobility that might threaten their social relationships and emotional security. Multiple boys stated they would 'refuse to go' if moved from lower to higher sets, with one explaining:

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[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.

> I wouldn't go in. I'd stay off. I don't like them from what I've heard of it. All my mates would call me snobby and that. […] I'd rather stay a dunce and have friends than be a genius without friends.[91]

Streaming had created what Hargreaves termed 'anti-academic attitudes' that functioned as a resistance to the psychological and social damage done by moving up sets.[92] Negative social regard ('dunce') was preferable to being perceived to have an inflated sense of self based on academic merit, which would in turn prove socially isolating.

Hargreaves' analysis revealed that streaming had created two distinct approaches to self-feeling that reflected broader class divisions in emotional opportunity and psychological citizenship. The 'academic subculture' of higher streams promoted self-esteem through 'individual effort in academic competition', whilst the 'delinquescent subculture' of lower streams framed 'self-esteem [as] a collective product, since it can be obtained only in relation to the group as a whole, that is, through conformity to anti-academic group pressures'.[93] This recognition of stratified types of self-esteem demonstrated how streaming functioned not merely as educational organisation but as emotional segregation that taught children fundamentally different approaches to self-worth and social relationships. These ideas had repercussions in advice about teaching practice, for example in a 1959 book produced for primary school teachers by the Ministry of Education, which explained to teachers dealing with 'duller' children who struggled in school that 'the most important thing for these children is to keep them hopeful and to make them welcome and respected in the community'.[94]

Children's testimonies provided significant evidence that the tripartite system's promise to protect vulnerable pupils from damaging social comparisons had failed. Rather than shielding lower-achieving children from psychological injury, streaming had institutionalised emotional hierarchy whilst teaching all pupils that their self-worth was legitimately determined by their academic placement. These accounts revealed how educational structures could shape not only children's academic opportunities but their fundamental understanding of selfhood, social relationships, and emotional citizenship, positioning self-feeling as central to the systematic reproduction of class divisions through educational policy.

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[91] Ibid., p.65.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid., p.134.
[94] Ministry of Education, *Primary Education*, pp.72-3.

These ideas were also found in the growing field of educational sociology in the 1950s which was increasingly of the opinion that the educational system in England 'was at least maintaining, or even strengthening, rather than diminishing, class inequality'.[95] This coincided with growing scepticism in academic psychology about intelligence testing.[96] As Wooldridge has observed, sociologists like A. H. Halsey and Basil Bernstein highlighted the way class interacts with 'the very structure of ability', pointing to the way that examinations favoured middle class children who had a more 'elaborate linguistic code'.[97] Similarly, the education system's 'indifference to "non-school knowledge"' was found to support 'middle-class culture and forced working-class children to internalise a sense of their own incompetence':

> The organisation and reward system of the schools moulded the personalities and self-images of their pupils, preparing middle-class children for authority and working-class children for subordination.[98]

As John Lawson and Harold Silver observe, by the 1950s several factors had converged to make the case for comprehensive, rather than selective education. These included the collating and publicising of evidence from existing comprehensive schools, emerging doubt about the effectiveness of intelligence testing, and the rise of a new sociology of education which was growing in influence in education policy discussions.[99] In this context, critics of selective education also drew on alternative frameworks that repositioned self-feeling as flourishing through social diversity rather than requiring protection from it. These comprehensive advocates appropriated the same psychological discourse that had legitimised the tripartite system, arguing that inclusive schooling would serve children's emotional needs more effectively than segregated arrangements.

The Scottish model demonstrated how comprehensive approaches could foster authentic emotional development through community belonging rather than individual psychological management. The 1947 Fyfe Report on Scottish secondary education articulated a distinctly social vision of emotional development that directly challenged English approaches to psychological protection. The report argued that secondary education should 'provide a rich social environment' where 'the interplay of personalities' would foster healthy adolescent

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[95] Gordon et al, *Education and Policy*, p.72.
[96] Lowe, *Death of Progressive Education*, p.53.
[97] Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, pp.304-5.
[98] Ibid., p.304.
[99] Lawrence and Silver, *A Social History of Education*, p.418.

development more effectively than the carefully segregated arrangements designed to shield vulnerable children from social comparison.[100] This approach positioned diverse educational communities as emotionally superior precisely because they enabled children to encounter varied social relationships and multiple forms of achievement rather than the artificially restricted environments of selective education. Crucially, self-feeling was framed as developing through enrichment and exposure rather than protection and restriction. The Scottish model explicitly rejected assumptions that children's emotional wellbeing required isolation from social diversity and academic challenge. The Fyfe report noted that whilst all adolescents required security 'from the very instability and unformedness of his own self', this challenge could only be met through encountering 'mature and balanced personalities' where their 'aspirations [...] are nourished' and 'impulsive life is controlled without violence and directed along healthy and creative channels'.[101] The report concluded that 'thus environed, the developing personality has fair prospects of attaining an adult selfhood that is at once finely social and fully individual', positioning self-feeling as fundamentally social in origin rather than solely individually managed.[102]

Progressive English authorities began developing similar arguments that positioned comprehensive education as psychologically necessary for authentic emotional development. London County Council's 1947 proposals for multilateral schools drew explicitly on emerging psychological theories about the benefits of diverse educational communities, combining them with individual attention for 'the full development of personality' which it argued, was education's 'first objective'.[103] However, even these progressive schemes revealed the continuing influence of differentiation thinking, with recommendations for internal organisation that would enable struggling children to 'gain more confidence if he is put into a class containing pupils like himself working on lines better suited to their capacity', including 'more practical work' that might 'greatly help and encourage him'.[104] This tension demonstrated how comprehensive advocates struggled to reconcile inclusive ideals with persistent assumptions about emotional vulnerability and individual differences. By 1970, in a report documenting the progress of comprehensive reform, authors Caroline Benn and

[100] Scottish Education Department Advisory Council on Education in Scotland, *Secondary Education*, HMSO (1947), p.10.
[101] Ibid., pp.10-1.
[102] Ibid., p.11.
[103] London County Council, *Replanning London Schools* (1947), p.25.
[104] Ibid., p.47.

Brian Simon argued that streaming within schools was prevalent and hindered comprehensivisation by sustaining 'the old selective system in a new guise'.[105]

Teachers working in early comprehensive schools provided compelling evidence that diverse educational environments could successfully foster self-confidence across all ability ranges. In *Forum* in 1959 Peter Mauger – head teacher of a secondary school in Wanstead – reflected on his experimentation with unstreamed classes, describing 'the relief and happiness this simply but fundamentally important action brought to our children'. Focusing specifically on the fate of 'average' children, he argued that 'security and constructive happiness' could be 'consciously planned' to ensure that 'latent ability' of children was realised, positioning comprehensive organisation as essential for unlocking emotional as well as academic potential.[106] In Mauger's vision, so long as children were 'treated as individuals', they could 'develop into confident, well-integrated young people' which he claimed 'is the most important task of education'.[107] This reflected a sense that self-feeling flourished when children experienced genuine equality of status and opportunity rather than the carefully managed but ultimately hierarchical arrangements of selective education. Within a comprehensive system, some educators were optimistic that self-feeling was something that could be enhanced, rather than simply protected. Enhancing self-feeling could yield promising results and release untapped potential in pupils.

By the end of the 1950s, critiques of selection regularly included evidence that testing, streaming, and selection were damaging to children's self-feeling. The tripartite system was held to reproduce social inequality at the emotional level. In David Hargreaves' model, self-esteem was a feature of a new 'delinquescent subculture' that stemmed from selective practices in education, where self-esteem became a 'collective' resource attached to social stigmas and pressures.[108] New visions of educational reform tentatively positioned comprehensive schools as sites of enhanced self-feeling and routes to untapped potential, although in reality, the required individualised attention in these visions rarely materialised in overcrowded schools in 1960s and 1970s England. Nevertheless, the idea that enhanced self-esteem might itself function as a corrective to the poor outcomes for 'average' children gained some traction by the 1960s, particularly among entrepreneurial psychologists.

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[105] Lowe, *Death of Progressive* Education, p.51.
[106] Peter Mauger, 'Education of the Average Child: A Symposium', *Forum* 2.1 (1959), p.9.
[107] Ibid., p.11.
[108] Hargreaves, *Social Relations in a Secondary School*, p.134.

3.3 Self-Esteem and Remedial Education

The preceding section examined how mounting criticism of selective education's psychological damage had begun to expose the tripartite system's failure to protect children's emotional wellbeing. Arguments about comprehensivisation brought educational discourse to a crucial juncture where the very premises of educational organisation required fundamental reconsideration. By the late 1950s, a profound shift was underway in British educational thinking about self-esteem that would begin to influence new approaches to educational inequality. Where earlier policy discourse had primarily conceptualised self-feeling as vulnerable to damage from inappropriate educational environments, a new understanding emerged that positioned self-esteem as an educational resource that could be systematically cultivated to address inequality itself. This transformation marked a crucial evolution, as self-esteem moved from being primarily understood as a symptom of educational stratification to being deployed as a potential cure for it. Rather than simply protecting children from experiences that might damage their self-regard, educators increasingly sought to build confidence as a prerequisite for academic success and social mobility.

This causal reconceptualisation of the role of self-esteem was catalysed by a growing awareness that, as a result of educational inequality in the tripartite system, self-esteem was being systematically denied to certain groups of children. This prompted remedial approaches that sought to address educational disadvantage through psychological intervention. As evidence mounted that selection and streaming created widespread experiences of failure and inferiority-feeling, educational psychologists and progressive educators explored whether confidence could be cultivated in isolation to underpin educational success. From the late 1950s through to the 1980s, self-esteem building evolved from an experimental therapeutic technique into a policy framework for understanding diverse groups of 'disadvantaged' children, including those in secondary modern schools, disabled pupils, and children from immigrant families. These children were increasingly understood as having a deficit of self-esteem. This section traces how a fundamental reorientation of educational priorities positioned children's emotional wellbeing not merely as a desirable outcome but as the vital prerequisite for academic achievement and social progress. This would inform the renewal of 'progressive' education associated with the 1967 Plowden Report.

The recognition that self-esteem might serve as a prerequisite for rather than consequence of educational success emerged within critical discourse about selective education and its

visions of a fairer alternative. These ideas often emerged from teachers' experiences and accounts of experimental practice before being incorporated into official policy frameworks. This early phase was characterised by innovative practitioners who observed that traditional remedial approaches failed to address the emotional barriers that seemed to prevent children from engaging with learning, prompting experimental methods that prioritised confidence-building as foundational educational work. In the pages of *Forum* came a clear articulation of self-esteem as educational prerequisite. The journal's editors, Robin Pedley and Brian Simon, argued that with growing interest in school reorganisation came an 'urgent' need for a 'revaluation of purposes'. This included, primarily, a reorientation of focus towards 'the education of the average child', justified partly on grounds that 'those [children] categorised as backward are a great deal more educable than was previously thought'. The authors linked this explicitly to the promise contained in 're-establishing the child's confidence in his own ability'.[109]

To illustrate this principle, *Forum* featured the contribution of June Partington, a history teacher at Peckham Girls' School, who documented her experience with a 'backward' class of London girls whose confidence had been depleted following the eleven-plus examination. Partington argued that 'to establish confidence was [...] first priority', advocating practical methods including giving children responsibilities to improve their sense of value in the school community alongside 'appropriate easy reading activities' wherein experiences of success would 'increase their confidence considerably'. Reading, she contended, was fundamentally 'a question of confidence'.[110] Partington's approach, which she termed 'educational cunning', involved deliberately overlooking minor inaccuracies in spelling, which yielded 'good psychological effect' and enhanced enthusiasm for the subject at hand.[111] This represented a fundamental departure from traditional remedial education that prioritised accuracy and correction, instead positioning emotional cultivation as the foundation for subsequent academic progress. Similarly, Peter Mauger had identified confidence-building as the foremost educational objective. However, he cautioned against treating confidence-building as 'a substitute' for academic achievement, arguing instead that it should serve as 'the vital prerequisite'.[112] This revealed an emerging sense that emotional and academic development were not competing priorities but causally related processes.

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[109] Robin Pedley and Brian Simon, 'Inside the Schools', *Forum* 1.3 (1959), p.81.
[110] Partington, 'Experiences with a Backward Class', p.82.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Mauger 'Education of the Average Child: A Symposium', p.11.

Official recognition of self-esteem as educational prerequisite also appeared in Ministry of Education guidance well before its incorporation into major policy reports. A 1950 Ministry pamphlet, drawing on evidence from the armed forces about 'inferiority-feeling and a lack of self-respect among men who had lower than average reading abilities', concluded that 'a degree of confidence in themselves has to be created in their own minds before real learning can begin'.[113] This reversed traditional assumptions about the relationship between achievement and self-regard, positioning emotional cultivation as necessarily preceding rather than following academic progress. Subsequent Ministry publications developed this understanding across different subject areas and age groups. A 1954 pamphlet on language and English education argued that for young school leavers attending remedial classes in evening institutes,

> A merely remedial approach to English is not enough. Something more stimulating, more flattering to self-esteem and more clearly related to the needs of everyday life, is needed.

The pamphlet recommended using newspapers as reading material rather than more abstract works, acknowledging that confidence-building required materials that pupils found personally relevant and accessible.[114]

The Ministry's 1959 publication *Primary Education* – a new edition of the early Board of Education's *Handbook of Suggestions for Teachers* – positioned teachers as emotional as well as academic facilitators, urging educators to demonstrate enjoyment of children's work in order to encourage pupils to model this attitude and contribute 'greatly to his sense of importance, satisfaction and self-respect'.[115] The publication critiqued adults who displayed 'anti-social and conformist traits', particularly the 'timid and anxious mother' who was labelled a 'robber' for denying children opportunities for freedom in play.[116] Such guidance positioned emotional management as central to educational effectiveness rather than ancillary to academic instruction. Similarly, a 1960 pamphlet on science education in secondary schools explicitly framed self-feeling as precursor to rather than symptom of academic success, describing schools that used 'simple studies in science' for 'backward pupils' to provide 'two essential conditions of progress: sufficient stimulation to make the necessary

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[113] Ministry of Education, *Reading* Ability, p.27.
[114] Ministry of Education, *Language*, HMSO 26 (1954), p.89.
[115] Ministry of Education, *Primary Education*, p.22.
[116] Ibid.

effort and a growing self-confidence'.[117] Self-confidence was increasingly framed as a specific prerequisite for effective learning rather than merely a desirable outcome.

By 1959, challenges to educational 'consensus' in education were becoming increasingly apparent and acknowledged in official policy discourse.[118] The 1960s saw policymakers grappling with fundamental questions about education's purpose in a changing society, including its relationship to children's self-feeling. The decade saw a degree of consolidation of remedial approaches to education that positioned confidence-building as serving both individual development and national progress. Several key reports established the theoretical foundations and practical frameworks that would institutionalise self-esteem as a central educational concern. This began with the Crowther Report on the education of adolescents aged between 15 and 18 which laid critical groundwork for subsequent policy developments by explicitly linking educational approaches to changing social conditions and adolescent psychological needs. Although it did not explicitly advocate comprehensive education, it highlighted rapid population growth and economic change as problems for selective methods of educational organisation.[119] Significantly, it afforded attention to some of the emotional implications of this change. The report identified demographic shifts that had resulted in 'personality and social changes for the typical adolescent', noting that the traditional large family structure which had ensured 'no child could long hold the centre of the stage' had given way to smaller families where increased parental attention 'tend[ed] to emphasise and increase the inherent isolation and self-centredness of the adolescent'. This report ultimately argued that 'attitudes and habits of affect' as well as 'social conditions' influence educational outcomes and possibilities.[120]

The authors linked this to what it described as education's 'double task' in the new technological age: providing relevant qualifications whilst concerning itself 'with the development of human personality and with teaching the individual to see himself in due proportion to the world in which he has been set'. This formulation positioned personal development as equally important to economic preparation, arguing that children should be seen as 'individual human beings' rather than 'the "supply" that meets any "demand"'.[121] The

[117] Ministry of Education, *Science in Secondary Schools*, HMSO 38 (1960), p.44.
[118] Gordon et al, *Education and Policy*, p.74. Gordon and colleagues cite 1959 as something of a turning point in post-war consensus in education, but acknowledge that here, '[consensus] had always been more fragile than in other areas of social policy'.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ministry of Education, *15-18*, pp.35-6.
[121] Ibid., p.53.

report explicitly prioritised educational approaches justified by 'the life they will lead' over 'the living they will earn', marking a decisive commitment to personal rather than purely economic motivations for educational policy. Alongside its overt criticism of traditional rote learning – instead preferring an education 'based on a chain of discovery' which enhances the child's 'self-confidence in his growing mastery of the subject' in an 'emancipa[tion] from the textbook' – positioned the Crowther report as a return to the child-centred progressive discourse of the 1930s and would be taken up in the renewal of progressive education encapsulated in the 1967 Plowden Report.[122]

The idea that there might by psychological prerequisites for educational success was reflected four years later in the 1963 Newsom Report titled *Half Our Future*, commissioned in response to growing public and political concern that a significant portion of the school population were underserved by the education system.[123] The report's focus on 'approximately half the pupils of our secondary schools' – those deemed 'average' or 'less than average' in ability – explicitly acknowledged that self-confidence had become scarce among particular groups whose disadvantages extended far beyond the classroom.[124] Significantly, the report argued that all children 'whatever their natural endowments, [...] all need to attain self-respect and a reason for wanting to work well'.[125] Its emphasis on universal entitlement to self-respect was coupled with stark awareness that this psychological resource was systematically absent among those it termed 'half our future'.[126] The report promoted initiatives that built confidence in children, while criticising corporal punishment for its negative psychological impact. On residential trips, it noted that pupils 'seem to come back with a new zest for everything they do', quoting one headteacher who remarked about children returning from such trips as "having a sort of glow about them" and remarked on 'their confidence and responsible attitudes.'[127] In this vein, drama, physical education, and modern languages continued to be promoted as a means of enabling self-expression and enhancing 'self-respect'.[128] Conversely, corporal punishment was criticised on the grounds that it was 'humiliating.'[129] Its critique of testing also demonstrated a concern with preserving self-regard. Children 'get worried', it observed. 'What little confidence they had evaporates.

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[122] Ibid., p.262.
[123] Ministry of Education, *Half Our Future*, p.xiii.
[124] Ibid., p.3; p.xv.
[125] Ibid., p.15.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid., p.49.
[128] Ibid., p.161
[129] Ibid., p.71.

They give a much poorer account of themselves than they need. Their self-esteem suffers. The teacher forms a poor opinion of their work.'[130] According to the Newsom Report, for average and below-average children in particular, confidence-building alongside protection from degradation, could serve as a means to enhance both the experience of education and, possibly, its outcomes.

By 1967, the Plowden Report *Children and Their Primary Schools* represented a culmination of thought about self-feeling and education through the lens of its 'controlled progressivism'.[131] The report focused on many of the key issues concerning educators, including streaming, social disadvantage, and the eleven-plus examination.[132] The report reflected the era's optimism about reform whilst drawing on progressive experiments in primary education, particularly in Oxfordshire and Leicestershire.[133] Although the report was viewed 'as an iconic statement' of progressivism, historians have pointed to the report's relative opacity in terms of its specific vision for primary education.[134]

Nevertheless, the Plowden Report did pay significant attention to the question of self-regard in its commentary on education in England, focusing on the psychological consequences of low expectations and incorporating the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget to explain children's tendencies to self-regard. It incorporated many of the critiques of selective education and streaming, noting that 'boys and girls tend to live up to, or down to, their reputations.'[135] The Report also reinforced the importance of positive self-regard, connecting educational environments with children's emotional development. The report argued that children 'form their sense of personal worth and their moral sense from early experiences of acceptance, approval and disapproval', positioning schools as crucial sites for emotional as well as intellectual development.[136]

Plowden's analysis of remedial education helped to consolidate the therapeutic turn that had emerged during the previous decade. The report argued that 'to be educated in an unsatisfactory remedial class can be the worst arrangement of all' if such provision failed to mitigate the 'failure and hopelessness' experienced by struggling learners. Effective remedial education required approaches designed to restore self-confidence through 'affection,

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[130] Ibid., p.121.
[131] Lawson and Silver, *A Social History of Education*, p.447.
[132] Lowe, *Death of Progressive Education*, p.46.
[133] Department of Education and Science, *Children and Their Primary Schools*, pp.504-20.
[134] Lowe, *Death of Progressive Education*, p.46.
[135] Department of Education and Science, *Children and Their Primary Schools*, p.154.
[136] Ibid., p.25.

stability and order', enabling children to receive 'special attention from adults' who could observe their particular interests and 'reinforce the desire to learn'.[137] This formulation positioned emotional restoration as the foundation for academic recovery. The Report also provided systematic justification for reward-based approaches grounded in self-esteem theory. The report encouraged teachers to incorporate systems 'such as marks and stars' due to children's perceived reliance on 'parents' or teachers' approval' to fulfil their self-esteem needs. Self-esteem was framed as essential for maintaining discipline as well as attainment, with the report suggesting that 'if each child is valued for himself, there is less reason to lie, whether from fear, idleness or the desire for self-aggrandisement'.[138]

But despite its promotion of confidence-building approaches, Plowden maintained some scepticism about self-esteem as an explicit pedagogical goal. When referencing teacher interviews about educational aims, the report noted that phrases such as 'confidence', 'perseverance', and 'alertness' occurred repeatedly but assessed these as 'little more than expressions of benevolent aspiration' which had limited use beyond providing 'a rough guide to the general climate of a school, but which may have a rather tenuous relationship to the educational practices that actually go on there'.[139]

It was ultimately in the endeavours of enterprising educational psychologists that self-feeling would be systematically studied in relation to remedial education. The 1968 Summerfield Report on educational psychologists provided official endorsement for an emotions-based remedial learning approach by consolidating the understanding of circular relationships between emotion and achievement. The report noted that behind learning difficulties 'often lies an emotional trouble', whilst observing that successful reading instruction could result in 'an access of satisfaction and self-confidence' that 'may cause emotional troubles to disappear'. Crucially, the report also recognised that some children were 'so anxious or so aggressive that [they were] unable to learn' until psychological barriers were addressed.[140] This circular relationship positioned educational psychologists as essential educational infrastructure rather than specialist therapeutic services.

Building on this development, from the early 1970s, some educational psychologists in England began experimental attempts to isolate self-esteem as a specific learning tool,

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[137] Ibid., pp.195-6.
[138] Ibid., p.257.
[139] Ibid., p.186.
[140] Department of Education and Science, *Psychologists in Education Services*, HMSO (1968), pp.62-6.

seeking to operationalise the mainstream understanding of confidence as educational prerequisite into systematic therapeutic interventions. The most systematic development of self-esteem as an educational remedy emerged through the work of educational psychologist Denis Lawrence, whose research in the late 1960s and early 1970s transformed the emerging understanding of confidence as educational tool into a comprehensive therapeutic methodology. Lawrence's approach represented a decisive shift from a general recognition of self-esteem's importance to its isolation as a specific psychological tool that could be systematically deployed to enhance learning.

In his work as Senior Educational Psychologist with Somerset County Council, Lawrence observed that 'the child's emotional life is the most crucial factor in determining progress in reading'.[141] His emphasis on 'the child's attitude towards himself' as more important than 'books or apparatus' in remedial education reflected a fundamental reorientation of educational priorities, positioning psychological intervention as the primary tool for addressing academic failure.[142] In his 1973 publication *Improved Reading Through Counselling,* Lawrence claimed to have 'discovered a definite association between failure and self-image', contending that successful intervention required addressing emotional attitudes even in children without obvious signs of emotional disturbance.[143]

Lawrence's theoretical framework drew explicitly on traditional social comparison theory, defining self-concept as comprising three interrelated components: self-image formed through social interactions, the ideal self shaped by parental influence, and self-esteem reflecting alignment between self-image and ideal self. For children, Lawrence argued, failure in one domain such as reading could affect their entire sense of worth because their 'selves' remained fluid and interconnected.[144] Central to Lawrence's argument was the claim that social pressure around reading fostered such significant anxiety that when children failed, 'the sense of failure was now generalised to the whole personality so that the inferior reader sees himself also as an inferior person', invoking feelings of being 'unworthy, inadequate, and unloved'. This was an understanding of self-esteem rooted in social comparison on which the education system in England had long relied, but was more explicit

[141] Denis Lawrence, *Improved Reading Through Counselling* (London: Weatherby Woolnough Ltd, 1973), p.7.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid., pp.19-22.

in treating reading difficulties as fundamentally psychological rather than educational problems, requiring therapeutic rather than instructional solutions.

Lawrence's approach prioritised empathy, non-verbal communication, and genuine emotional support with minimal interpretation or cognitive analysis. The counselling methods he described were intentionally designed to be accessible to untrained individuals, emphasising emotional connection over technical expertise. He distinguished his approach from formal therapy, likening it to a 'normal, happy, instinctive' mother-child relationship.[145] Sessions were brief, informal affairs conducted in environments resembling a middle-class living room rather than typical classrooms – 'warm, comfortable, well-furnished surroundings and with absolute privacy'.[146] Lawrence's methods, whilst innovative in their therapeutic application, implicitly established particular domestic environments as the model for effective emotional support. His emphasis on creating counselling spaces that resembled middle-class spaces and his acknowledgement that family background had 'important influence on satisfactory emotional development' suggested that children from different domestic contexts might require remedial intervention to approximate these emotional norms.[147]

Rather than framing self-esteem as something to protect, Lawrence repositioned it as a resource to cultivate. His work critiqued the remedial teaching profession's treatment of children's emotional needs as 'of secondary importance' compared to 'mechanical skills' of reading, mirroring the observations of teachers in the pages of *Forum*.[148] Like critics of selection and recent ministerial reports, Lawrence targeted his interventions at 'backward' readers, rather than those children he deemed to be working at a normal pace. He argued that 'continually seeking for underlying personality problems' in successful pupils would be 'ludicrous' and 'disastrous'.[149] This distinction reinforced the understanding that self-esteem intervention was appropriate for certain categories of children whilst 'normal' children's confidence remained unproblematic, establishing important boundaries around therapeutic intervention. Self-feeling was framed as a problem and solution only for children deemed outside the normal bounds of healthy progress and development, which would have repercussions for who and where remedial methods were targeted.

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[145] Ibid., pp.28-29.
[146] Ibid., p.27.
[147] Ibid. p.12.
[148] Denis Lawrence, 'Remedial Reading and Counselling', *Reading* 9.1 (1975), p.12.
[149] Denis Lawrence, *Improved Reading*, p.11.

Lawrence's work was influential and received significant coverage in the national media. The *Daily Mail* publicised his findings under the headline 'Wanted: Kind aunties for poor readers', emphasising the easy simplicity of Lawrence's findings that 'children who are slow at learning to read can be helped by just half an hour a week with a kindly auntie figure'.[150] Media attention reflected growing public interest in psychological explanations for educational problems and confidence in remedial interventions that promised measurable improvements without requiring structural educational reforms. Lawrence submitted written evidence to the 1975 Bullock Report *A Language for Life* which incorporated his insights into mainstream education policy guidance. In its section on written expression, the report argued that 'the most important step the teacher can take' in teaching spelling was 'to improve the pupil's confidence in his own capacity'. Echoing earlier critics of selective examination, it contended that 'repeated failure reinforces a poor self-image' and urged teachers to avoid 'the correction of written work' where possible.[151] The report recommended that teachers 'create warm and sympathetic individual relationships with the pupils' such that 'failure is replaced by a sense of achievement, with all that this means for a child's confidence and self-respect'.[152] For older children, experiences of failure in school were linked to a tendency not to engage with higher or further education when school 'has become associated with low self-esteem'.[153] This therapeutic turn would prove influential in establishing self-esteem as a remedial strategy that could be systematically applied to diverse groups of disadvantaged children, fundamentally reshaping approaches to educational inequality across the following decade.

The therapeutic methodologies developed by psychologists like Lawrence and endorsed in policy reports in the 1970s were extended to groups of children perceived to be at educational disadvantage. These experiments revealed both the apparent versatility of self-esteem as an educational remedy and its limitations as a response to structural inequality. What had initially focused on 'backward' readers in secondary modern schools gradually encompassed disabled children, immigrant pupils, and even gifted children whose exceptional abilities could paradoxically create social and emotional difficulties. Self-esteem was not simply prescribed for these children, but informed ideas about the essential character of these groups. In the 1955 Underwood Report, therapeutic approaches were promoted for 'maladjusted' and

[150] Rodney Tyler, 'Wanted: Kind Aunties for Poor Readers', *Daily Mail*, 28 August 1972.
[151] Department of Education and Science, *A Language for Life*, HMSO (1975), p.167.
[152] Ibid., p.271.
[153] Ibid., 1975 p.277.

'educationally subnormal' children who were characterised as fundamentally 'insecure and unhappy, even though this may be concealed by a mask of self-assurance'.[154] The report positioned authentic self-confidence as a marker of mental health whilst arguing that parents and teachers often misinterpreted children's difficulties as lack of effort 'without recognising how profound is the lack of confidence'.[155] This understanding promoted educational psychologists who could 'organise remedial classes' specifically designed to enhance self-confidence and thereby mitigate maladjustment.[156] The aim of enhancing the self-esteem of handicapped pupils was reiterated in a 1956 Ministry of Education pamphlet on the *Education of the Handicapped Pupil* which described a shift in how children with disabilities were regarded in schools. Where disabled children had once been 'put away' in schools, provision increasingly focused on enhancing 'children's potentialities and restor[ing] their self-confidence, often after failure and frustration in the ordinary school'.[157]

This shift continued to feature in policy discourse into the 1970s. The 1978 Warnock Report on *Special Educational Needs* exemplified the application of self-esteem discourse to disabled children, advocating approaches that would ensure pupils gained 'as much independence as possible' to act as 'responsible contributors' to society.[158] The report explicitly linked self-confidence to social success, particularly employment, emphasising the development of young people's 'self-confidence and skill' as essential for their capacity 'to manage their personal life as independently as possible'.[159] Self-esteem-building was therefore positioned as serving broader policy objectives around reducing welfare dependency whilst promoting integration into mainstream educational settings wherever possible. In a similar vein, self-esteem was also central in some initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s to expanding educational opportunities for girls, particularly in relation to science and technology. 'Girls and Technology Education' was a Bridges Place Fellowship Project based at the University of London, concerned with encouraging girls to undertake Design and Technology education in secondary schools. Aside from increasing the number of opportunities girls had to engage in technological education, the project was focused on

[154] Ministry of Education, *Report of the Committee on Maladjusted Children*, HMSO (1955), p.3.
[155] Ibid., pp.24-5.
[156] Ibid., p.42.
[157] Ministry of Education, *Education of the Handicapped Pupil 1945-1955*, HMSO 30 (1956), pp.13-4.
[158] Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Handicapped Young People, *Special Educational Needs*, HMSO (1978), p.163.
[159] Ibid., p.210.

'contributing to self-image' of girls to instil in them the sense that they were 'competent to handle tools, equipment and materials'.[160]

Migration of families from the Commonwealth to England after the Second World War prompted a new set of concerns about remedial education. However, children from immigrant families were at first excluded from the paradigm of remedial self-esteem. Early responses to the educational needs of immigrant children used difference-based approaches that dismissed emotional differences as part and parcel of multicultural society and downplayed the psychological impact of racism on immigrant children. The 1963 Ministry pamphlet *English for Immigrants*, for example, warned teachers that 'children from other countries may be very different from English children in their emotional behaviour', going on to claim that children from the Mediterranean 'generally become more excitable and rather more difficult to control'.[161] Similarly, it presented an argument of adultification of immigrant children, suggesting that children from abroad 'mature physically and emotionally more quickly than do pupils of the same age in this country' which the authors linked to a range of academic, behavioural, and emotion 'complications'.[162] In 1967 the Plowden Report's optimistic but naïve assessment of racial integration suggested that children were naturally accepting of peers from different ethnic backgrounds and that prejudice rarely persisted in classrooms.[163] It acknowledged educational disadvantages faced by immigrant children but attributed these primarily to language barriers and 'culture shock', rather than recognising the systemic racism and exclusion they experienced.[164] While the report encouraged greater cultural awareness among teachers, it underestimated the psychological impact of racism and failed to propose robust structural or pastoral responses to support affected pupils. It did however, pay cursory attention to the fact that dispersal strategies for cultivating integration were both 'administratively difficult and psychologically unsound', urging that decisions were made based on 'language and other difficulties' experienced by immigrant children and 'not on account of their colour'.[165] Any notion that children from immigrant families might experience depleted self-esteem was explained as an intrinsic part of their status rather than as a socially-produced characteristic that might be overcome.

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[160] Institute of Education Archives, MYE/18, 'The what, why and how of GATE', c.1980.
[161] Ministry of Education, *English for Immigrants*, HMSO 43 (1963), p.13.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Department of Education and Science, *Children and Their Primary Schools*, p.69.
[164] Ibid., p.70.
[165] Ibid., p.72

By the late 1970s, however, ideas about the self-feeling of West Indian children in particular emerged within policy discourse. The 1981 interim report of an inquiry into what was perceived to be chronic underachievement among West Indian children positioned racism as the most significant factor contributing to educational disadvantage whilst defining racism explicitly as denying value to a child's 'identity, culture, self-esteem, views and feelings'.[166] Self-esteem was conceptualised as tightly interwoven with social comparison and identity, particularly around language validation, with teachers who dismissed Creole as 'bad English' seen to harm children's self-concepts whilst valuing it as part of a linguistic 'repertoire' was described as enhancing 'self-respect and self-confidence'.[167] Though the report stopped short of prescribing self-esteem as a direct remedy for underachievement, it highlighted how a child's self-image – damaged by racism – could undermine motivation and academic engagement. The ILEA's 1980 literacy survey suggested self-image was among the factors that influenced continued low reading attainment among West Indian children, even when social deprivation was accounted for.[168] Educational materials and classroom environments that reflected the diversity of British society were cited as ways to improve children's sense of belonging and self-worth, with good practice examples including culturally inclusive displays and curriculum content.[169]

By 1985, the final report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups built upon this foundation but offered more critical engagement with self-esteem as a contested psychological construct. Drawing on research by psychologist Peter Green, the report emphasised how teacher attitudes influenced pupils' self-concepts whilst noting that students perceived their own ability partly through appraisals received from teachers.[170] Significantly, Swann took a more sceptical stance toward self-esteem's explanatory power, concluding that there was no consistent evidence that ethnic minority children uniformly suffered from low self-confidence, with some studies showing West Indian children had higher self-esteem than their white peers. The report cautioned against overusing self-esteem as either diagnostic label or policy lever, warning that it risked distracting from structural inequalities in schools and society.[171] Despite this critical

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[166] Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups, *West Indian Children in Our Schools*, HMSO (1981), p.12.
[167] Ibid., pp.24-5.
[168] Ibid., p.20.
[169] Ibid., p.31.
[170] Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups, *Education for All*, HMSO (1985), p.50.
[171] Ibid., p.242.

engagement, Swann did not dismiss self-esteem as an important educational principle. Swann recommended 'multicultural understanding' in all aspects of schooling, including culturally sensitive teacher training and representation of minority cultures in school life to create environments where all pupils could feel secure, valued, and respected.[172] Yet, its most important contribution may have been decentring the psychological model of self-esteem in favour of an integrated approach that saw identity, motivation, and educational outcomes as deeply shaped by power, representation, and institutional structures. The implications of self-feeling for Black children and their communities in England is considered in more detail in the final chapter of this thesis.

This therapeutic turn in educational psychology marked a decisive transformation in how self-esteem was understood and deployed within education in England. Where earlier discourse had primarily conceptualised self-feeling as vulnerable to damage from inappropriate educational environments, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed potential for its repositioning as an educational resource that could be cultivated to address inequality itself. Denis Lawrence's work exemplified this 'causal revolution', demonstrating how confidence-building could be isolated as a specific remedial technique and applied across diverse groups of disadvantaged children. The extension of therapeutic approaches from 'backward' readers to disabled pupils, immigrant children, and other marginalised groups revealed both the ostensible versatility of self-esteem as a tool of remedial education as well as its growing influence in policy frameworks. With this shift came new understandings of certain groups of children, increasingly characterised by their deficiency of self-feeling they became new targets for self-esteem-boosting initiatives. This is explored in further detail in the next chapter, with particular emphasis on children with disabilities.

The emphasis placed on self-esteem within policy discourse shifted from its position as a symptom of educational inequality to a possible solution. However, this transition from symptom to cure was neither complete nor uncontested. The Swann Report's sceptical engagement with self-esteem discourse highlighted important limitations in psychological explanations for educational disadvantage, warning that overemphasis on individual confidence-building risked obscuring structural inequalities in schools and society. While self-esteem never entirely divorced itself from structural concerns in the British context, its isolation as a therapeutic tool was sufficient to prompt growing criticism from conservative

[172] Ibid., p.769.

defenders of formal, academic education who viewed emotional cultivation as undermining rigorous educational standards. This tension between therapeutic and traditional approaches would intensify during the 1970s and 1980s, as mounting concerns about educational standards and national competitiveness fuelled a backlash against child-centred progressivism that positioned self-esteem as emblematic of educational decline rather than reform.

3.4 Conservative Backlash? Worthy Selves and Earned Esteem

By the late 1960s, the progressive ideals enshrined in the Plowden Report had positioned self-feeling as a fundamental part of education. Schools were increasingly framed as sites of confidence-building, and self-esteem was a vital part – if not intrinsic to – academic success, particularly for less academic students. However, this centring of self-worth in education increasingly collided with mounting anxieties about educational standards, social discipline, and national decline. What emerged was not simply a rejection of progressive education, but a nuanced conservative counter-discourse of self-feeling that simultaneously critiqued what was perceived to be a 'sentimental' preoccupation with children's feelings whilst developing its own highly selective vision that dictated which selves were worthy of esteem. Rather than abandoning psychological approaches to childhood emotion, conservative commentators developed alternative frameworks that embraced self-esteem for those deemed deserving whilst critiquing its application to unworthy subjects. This conservative reframing of self-esteem discourse would prove remarkably influential in reshaping British educational culture, establishing new hierarchies of emotional entitlement that extended far beyond immediate educational contexts.

Although self-feeling had become part of a progressive educational orthodoxy in the postwar period, by the late 1960s several factors were converging to create conditions conducive to conservative backlash: economic pressures that raised questions about educational efficiency, social changes that challenged traditional authority relationships, and accumulating evidence that progressive methods might not be delivering their promised benefits for either individual children or social cohesion. For conservative commentators, student unrest of 1968 across Europe provided a particularly potent symbol of progressive education's alleged failures. Educational traditionalists linked university protests to permissive schooling that had allegedly failed to instil proper respect for authority. One such commentator Malcolm Muggeridge linked what he perceived as an 'ever more illiterate and unthinking' student body

to their attempt to 'break down every obstacle in the way of complete self-indulgence' as 'manifestations of the grossest conceit'.[173] Inflated self-regard – framed as a facet of progressive education – was viewed as either threat to social order or essential developmental goal, with the emphasis on young people's feelings allegedly producing narcissistic young adults incapable of social responsibility.

Economic pressures also contributed to growing scepticism about progressive methods that prioritised emotional development over measurable academic achievement. Rising inflation, industrial unrest, and international competition created demands for educational approaches that would more directly serve economic productivity and national competitiveness. Business leaders increasingly criticised schools for failing to equip young people with basic skills needed for the workplace, with a 1974 survey by the National Youth Employment Council revealing widespread employer dissatisfaction and public interventions by industrial figures such as Arnold Weinstock and John Methven echoing concerns about declining standards.[174]

Professional critiques also began to challenge progressive orthodoxies from within educational circles. Neville Bennett's 1976 study *Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress* provided what appeared to be empirical evidence challenging child-centred approaches, finding that children taught through formal or mixed methods appeared to perform better in reading, mathematics, and English than those taught through purely informal, discovery-based approaches.[175] Although the study was modest in scale and drew criticism for oversimplifying teaching practices, it gained disproportionate media attention and was widely presented as scientific proof that progressive methods were ineffective.[176] Similarly, philosophers like Richard Peters questioned the conceptual coherence of what were understood to be progressive ideals like 'self-realisation' and 'being oneself' as educational objectives, dismissing them as 'half-truths that are paraded as educational panaceas'.[177]

Media coverage played a crucial role in reshaping public discourse around progressive education, with outlets like the *Daily Mail* and *BBC Panorama* producing pieces about individual schools that amplified concerns about declining standards and classroom chaos. A 1977 *Panorama* film, for example, depicted 'total breakdown in discipline' at Faraday High

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[173] Robert Lacy, 'The Student Uproar', *The Illustrated London News*, 16th March 1968.
[174] James Silverwood and Peter Wolstencraft, 'The Ruskin Speech and Great Debate in English Education, 1976-1979: A Study of Motivation', *British Educational Research Journal* 49.4 (2023), p.770.
[175] Neville Bennett, *Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.140.
[176] Lowe, *Death of Progressive Education*, p.68.
[177] Richard Peters, 'A Recognisable Philosophy of Education: A Constructive Critique', in *Perspectives on Plowden*, ed. Richard Peters (Abingdon: Routledge, 1969), p.3.

School in Ealing. The documentary featured children smoking, swearing, and reading comics as teachers struggled to establish order in the classrooms.[178] This helped secure a narrative that framed comprehensive and progressive schools as sites of national decline, linking concerns about 'standards' with the alleged 'politicisation' of the classroom.[179] Provocative media representations successfully established connections between child-centred approaches and broader social pathologies that would prove difficult for progressive educators to counter.

The emergence of organised conservative opposition through the Black Papers on Education provided intellectual coherence to the previously scattered criticisms of progressive methods described above. The Black Papers, published between 1969 and 1977, crystallised growing concerns about student unrest, economic pressures, and educational standards into systematic alternative frameworks for understanding children's emotional development. Rather than simply rejecting concern for children's self-esteem, the Black Paper authors developed nuanced, conservative arguments that self-worth must be grounded in objective achievement, moral virtue, and social contribution rather than unconditional affirmation or therapeutic intervention. Founded by academics C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson amid post-1968 anxieties about student unrest, these publications linked political radicalism and perceived cultural decline to developments in schools, giving elite legitimacy to fears about egalitarianism whilst establishing frameworks for alternative approaches to children's emotional development.

The authors' backgrounds gave particular impetus to their conservative critique. Both Cox and Dyson were grammar-school-educated academics who had previously contributed to progressive educational discourse, whilst fellow contributor Rhodes Boyson was similarly a product of the grammar school system. Their defence of traditional academic standards and opposition to comprehensivisation represented an attempt to preserve mechanisms that had enabled their own social ascent. As James Wood has argued, from the perspective of Cox and Dyson, 'by threatening the grammar schools, the Labour Party was [...] kicking this ladder out from under the intelligent but underprivileged child'.[180] Their transformation into figureheads of reactionary educational movement by 1969 was seen as an extraordinary shift

[178] Christopher Rowlands, 'School's Fury Over Panorama in the Classroom', *Daily Mail*, Saturday 9th March 1977, p.3.
[179] Ken Jones, *Education in Britain: 1944 to the Present* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p.96.
[180] James Robert Woods 'Upward Mobility, Betrayal, and the Black Papers on Education', *Critical Quarterly* 62.2 (2020), p.80.

that shocked many former colleagues.[181] While they received support from grammar school teachers fearful of reorganisation, many responses were scathing, with one headteacher describing them as 'pseudo-criticism parading as educational theory' and another cancelling his school's subscription to *Critical Quarterly*.[182]

Despite often weak or distorted evidence, the Black Papers successfully established frameworks for alternative approaches to children's emotional development that would prove remarkably influential. Stefan Collini has argued that their rhetorical stance constituted a deliberate 'self-caricature' designed to invite overblown responses from critics whilst making progressive positions easier to dismiss.[183] Dyson's correspondence confirms that controversy was no accident, as he explicitly strategised about how to 'keep the present debate going' to maintain the papers' prominence and cultural influence.[184] Limitations aside, the Black Papers reflected a systematic conservative attempt to develop alternative frameworks for understanding children's emotional development that challenged progressive assumptions whilst maintaining engagement with psychological discourse.

The first Black Paper, Fight for Education, established key themes that would recur throughout the series, particularly the critique of what A.E. Dyson termed 'bankrupt and dangerous romanticism' rooted in beliefs that children were innately good and needed only freedom from social constraint to flourish.[185] Dyson located this shift in psychological influences 'from Freud to Piaget' and challenged 'the dogma with many educationalists' about 'unchallenged assumptions behind "self-expression", "self-fulfilment" as inalienable goods-in-themselves,' arguing that 'self-expression is valuable only when the self is worth expressing'.[186] The prospect of innate worth, he argued, had rendered 'the modern "self" […] at once too sacred and too shattered to be "pulled together" in old-fashioned ways', arguing that 'much neurosis and unhappiness' stemmed from this fragile modern self and 'excessive romantic concentration' upon it.[187] Progressive concern for authentic selfhood was framed as producing narcissistic individuals incapable of social discipline or productive contribution. Crucially, the conservative critique did not reject self-expression itself but rather appropriated

[181] Ibid., p.90.
[182] Ibid., p.94.
[183] Ibid., pp.91-3.
[184] Ibid., p.88.; p.94.
[185] A. E. Dyson, 'The Sleep of Reason', *Critical Survey* 4.1 (1969), p.78.
[186] C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, 'Comment', *Critical Survey* 4.1 (1969), p.6.
[187] A. E. Dyson, 'The Sleep of Reason', p.79.

it selectively, establishing criteria for determining which selves deserved cultivation and expression based on moral and intellectual development rather than inherent human dignity.

The conservative emphasis on earned self-esteem also reflected broader assumptions about the relationship between individual worth and social hierarchy. C.B. Cox's defence of examinations reflected a new conceptualisation of examination – usually framed as stressful and anxiety-inducing – where they could serve character as well as intellectual development. Cox insisted that examinations were not merely educationally necessary but existentially crucial because 'exams measure people against standards distilled from human traditions and achievements, not against inclinations spun lazily out of the "self"'.[188] This was reinforced by Richard Lynn's argument that Western society was 'inevitably hierarchical'. He suggested that educational approaches should prepare children to 'accept western society as it is', including their appropriate place within established social arrangements.[189] Examinations and selection were framed as a valuable way of preparing young people for the realities of life. In this traditionalist narrative, competitive assessment was positioned as essential for authentic self-development by providing objective frameworks for self-evaluation rather than relying on subjective feelings or therapeutic affirmation. Rhodes Boyson would later develop this argument most fully, contending that 'the human mind enjoys effort and competition' and that 'cocooning' children from challenge would leave them ill-prepared for adult responsibilities. His contention that 'all life is an examination' positioned competitive assessment as essential preparation for adult responsibilities whilst arguing that authentic confidence required exposure to objective standards rather than protection from potentially damaging comparisons.[190]

John Sparrow – warden of an Oxford college – provided a particularly pointed critique of progressive assumptions about protecting children's self-esteem from competitive pressure.[191] He challenged the notion that preserving pupils' confidence – especially that of 'backward' pupils – should override all other considerations, suggesting that such protective strategies might ultimately do more harm than good. Sparrow argued that while egalitarian policies might 'help maintain the self-esteem' of less able children, they risked depriving more able

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[188] C. B. Cox, 'In Praise of Examinations', *Critical Survey* 4.1 (1969), p.56.
[189] Richard Lynn, 'Streaming: Standards or Equality?', *Critical Survey* 5.1 (1970), p.28.
[190] Rhodes Boyson, 'In Defence of Examinations: the Unanswered Case', *Critical Survey* (1970), p.102.
[191] 'The Black Papers and the Debate About Standards', *Conservative History* <https://conservativehistory2.blogspot.com/2011/09/black-papers-and-debate-about-standards.html> [accessed 20th February 2022]

pupils of 'the stimulus of recognition and acclaim' whilst masking 'the real and unpalatable facts of life' through 'early coddling'.[192] This position marked a fundamental transformation of the traditionalist stance, directly contradicting the earlier post-war educational orthodoxy that had justified streaming and selective education precisely on psychological grounds of protecting less able children from damaging comparisons and preserving their self-esteem. Sparrow's argument represented a complete reversal, now prioritising the psychological needs of more able pupils whilst dismissing concerns about the emotional impact of selection on those deemed less capable.

Although the first Black Paper rejected psychological influences 'from Freud to Piaget', the second developed more systematic psychological arguments for conservative approaches to children's emotional development, drawing particularly on the work of Cyril Burt and H.J. Eysenck to critique the psychology that underpinned progressive methods. Burt's contribution challenged progressive conflation of permissiveness with authentic development, linking 'free discipline' and 'learning by discovery' to broader social symptoms of 'delinquency, violence and general unrest'.[193] Burt also invoked 'Freudian psychoanalysts' to ridicule mass concern with the 'inferiority complex' which was perceived to result from 'tests, competitive examinations, promotion by merit or attainment' and which should therefore, as he described the 'Freudian' position, 'be scrupulously shunned or at least reduced to the barest minimum'.[194] He argued that genuine self-concept could not be cultivated in a permissive vacuum but required foundations in 'self-discipline and industry', positioning traditional approaches as more psychologically beneficial than progressive alternatives.[195]

Despite their critique of progressive child-centredness, the Black Papers developed clear arguments for alternative forms of individual attention that would serve meritocratic rather than egalitarian objectives. Boyson's description of house systems demonstrated how conservative educators could embrace individualised attention whilst maintaining clear authority relationships and academic standards, describing structured communities where 'civilised values and tolerant concern for individuals' prevailed within units 'small enough

[192] John Sparrow, 'Egalitarianism and an Academic Elite', *Critical Survey* 4.1 (1969), p.65.
[193] Cyril Burt, 'The Mental Differences Between Children', *Critical Survey* 4.3 (1969), p.24.
[194] Ibid., p.23.
[195] Ibid., p.22.

for all to know and be known'.[196] Similarly, C.S. Hilditch's defence of traditional house systems and long-term teacher-pupil relationships similarly emphasised how individual growth could occur through trust and continuity within stable moral communities where authority facilitated rather than suppressed authentic development. According to Hilditch, 'latent qualities' could emerge through sustained relationships that enabled pupils to 'learn from mistakes without losing self-confidence', but only within frameworks that maintained clear expectations and standards.[197] This was a vision of personal development embedded within stable moral communities where authority facilitated rather than suppressed authentic development.

The Black Papers helped consolidate and sustain the critique of progressivism and comprehensivisation, although they did not constitute 'a sea-change in the rhetoric around education'.[198] Nevertheless, they successfully pre-empted 'a shift in the wider public mood', prompted by events at a primary school in North London.[199] The events at William Tyndale Primary School in the mid-1970s provided conservative critics with evidence about the apparent permissive dangers of prioritising children's self-esteem over structure and standardised attainment. Between 1974 and 1976, this small junior school in Islington became the epicentre of a national debate about educational methods when a group of teachers, led by headteacher Terry Ellis and deputy Brian Haddow, implemented radical interpretations of progressive educational theory that centred child-centred and child-led methods of learning. Their approach went far beyond the moderate progressivism endorsed by official reports like Plowden, creating an educational environment where traditional authority structures were dismantled in favour of pupil autonomy and democratic decision-making. Significantly, the events at the school opened progressive methods up to careful public scrutiny in a report published in 1976, following an inquiry into events at the school.[200] John Davis has argued that the William Tyndale affair represented 'a turning point in modern educational history,' marking the moment when progressive educational

[196] Rhodes Boyson, 'The Essential Conditions for the Success of a Comprehensive School', *Critical Survey* 4.3 (1969), p.59.
[197] C. S. Hilditch, 'Prove all Things', *Critical Survey* 5.1 (1970), p.47.
[198] Lowe, *Death of Progressive* Education, p.56.
[199] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, p.219.
[200] Gordon et al, *Education and Policy*, p.166.

experiments lost public credibility and conservative critiques gained more mainstream acceptance.[201]

The philosophy of the school positioned children's self-concept at the centre of educational practice, with beliefs that 'children making their own decisions about their learning and their lives' would become 'self-motivated' and confident learners.[202] The aims of the infant school explicitly included developing 'the children's initiative' whilst creating 'an atmosphere of happiness, security and confidence in adults' so that 'each child will build up a healthy self concept which provides a sound basis for learning as well as better adjusted adults'.[203] This approach represented an extension of progressive principles of self-feeling, wherein emotional development was positioned as the primary educational objective and prerequisite from which academic achievement would naturally follow.

The school's 'option scheme' gave children substantial autonomy over their learning activities whilst de-emphasising traditional academic subjects in favour of creative expression and social development. Staff believed that if self-esteem was developed through activities where children excelled, they would subsequently gain confidence to succeed in more traditional academic areas, even 'if it meant some relaxation for a time in standards of reading and of numeracy'.[204] Staff such as Haddow promoted 'skills that perhaps traditional educationalists would ignore' including decision-making and democratic participation, suggesting that self-esteem building required fundamental changes to power relationships within schools rather than simply therapeutic intervention or pastoral support.[205]

The school began to receive significant attention in the press when teaching assistant Annie Walker circulated a 'manifesto' against the teaching methods and resulting disciplinary issues that she felt were arising in the school as a result.[206] The dramatic public breakdown that followed provided conservatives with powerful evidence for their arguments. Parents began withdrawing their children, academic standards plummeted, and reports emerged of classroom chaos and behavioural problems that appeared to confirm conservative warnings

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[201] John Davis, 'The Inner London Education Authority and the William Tyndale Junior School Affair, 1974-1976', *Oxford Review of Education* 28.2-3 (2002), p.275.
[202] Robin Auld QC, *William Tyndale Junior and Infants Schools Public Inquiry*, ILEA (1976), p.143.; p.78.
[203] Ibid., pp.143-4.
[204] *Times Educational Supplement*, 23rd January 1976, cited in Davis 'The Inner London Education Authority', p.286.
[205] Davis, 'The Inner London Education Authority', p.284.
[206] Ibid., p.275.

about the consequences of prioritising children's feelings over discipline and achievement.[207] An inquiry into the school was launched in 1975, fuelling debate about the role of government in upholding educational standards.[208]

Annie Walker's testimony to the Auld inquiry into the school described an atmosphere of 'chaotic violence' where the emphasis on self-expression had created 'a free-for-all atmosphere of total self-indulgence, self-pleasing, do-what-you-want-for-the-moment'.[209] Walker's critique was particularly significant because it placed self-feeling at the centre of her analysis of educational failure. Her condemnation of the school focused specifically on how the preoccupation with building children's self-esteem had produced 'spoiled' children unprepared for either education or society, arguing that this emphasis on self-feeling had created pupils who were 'growing up ignorant, selfish, rude [...] lazy, effete'.[210] Walker's argument exemplified the crux of the conservative position: that indulgence in self-feeling, rather than preparing children for the realities of competitive, hierarchical life, had produced declining standards and permissive behaviour. Her critique revealed conservative assumptions about the relationship between authentic self-development and social discipline, positioning concern for children's self-feelings as fundamentally undermining the character formation necessary for productive citizenship and social contribution.

The affair received extensive media coverage that connected progressive education's emphasis on self-feeling to broader concerns about discipline and national decline. The political dimensions of the controversy revealed how self-esteem discourse had become central to broader ideological conflicts about social change and educational purpose, with the school's failure serving as powerful evidence that concern for children's feelings could undermine rather than support healthy development. By 1976, conservative critiques had penetrated official discourse and would shape educational policy direction. The year marked a decisive moment in the consolidation of political and professional critique against Plowden-style progressivism, with the government producing an internal policy document known as the 'Yellow Book' that painted a grave picture of 'the uncritical application of informal methods'.[211] This narrative was publicly echoed in Prime Minister James Callaghan's Ruskin

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[207] Ibid., p.290.
[208] Gordon et al, *Education and Policy*, p.166.
[209] Auld, *William Tyndale*, p.81.
[210] Ibid.
[211] Secretary of State for Education and Science, *School Education in England: Problems and Initiatives*, HMSO (1976), p.7.

College speech, drafted by the Department of Education and Science policy unit, which launched the so-called 'Great Debate' on education.[212]

Callaghan's speech set out four key concerns regarding British education: closer alignment between education and industry, questioning the efficacy of progressive teaching methods, endorsing the idea of a universal basic curriculum, and emphasising an enhanced role for Her Majesty's Inspectorate in upholding universal national standards.[213] The speech marked a rhetorical shift, openly criticising the lack of uniformity and perceived decline in standards within the education system whilst asserting that education should now serve the 'world of work'.[214] Though couched in moderate language and explicitly distanced from 'Black Paper prejudices', the speech legitimised criticism of the education profession and prepared the political ground for greater state intervention.[215]

The Yellow Book further revealed how far traditionalist concerns had entered official discourse. While acknowledging the potential of child-centred methods to make pupils 'relaxed, confident and happy', it warned that such approaches 'could prove a trap to less able and experienced teachers' when applied 'without proper rigour.' This qualified acceptance of Plowden-style pedagogy was underpinned by a push for measurable performance and a renewed emphasis on the three Rs.[216] Significantly, even as the document reiterated the language of self-confidence and personal identity, these were now embedded within a framework of economic purpose. It argued that an 'increased self-confidence and a surer sense of personal identity' should emerge not as ends in themselves, but as by-products of vocational preparedness, adaptability, and employability.[217] In this reframing, self-concept survived but was transformed from a progressive educational right to an outcome of economic functionality. After a moment of causal transformation in the progressive tradition, self-esteem once again became framed as a symptom of socially-defined success – or failure.

Traditional 'backlash' against progressive self-feeling discourse in the 1970s reflects the complexity of thinking about children's emotional development in post-war England. Rather than simply rejecting concern for children's feelings, conservative critics developed alternative frameworks that selectively embraced confidence-building whilst establishing

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[212] Gordon et al, *Education and Policy*, p.95.
[213] Silverwood and Wolstencroft, 'The Ruskin Speech', p.769.
[214] Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, p.216; Jones, *Education in Britain*, p.73.
[215] Gordon et al, *Education and Policy*, p.316.
[216] Secretary of State for Education and Science, *School Education in England*, pp.6-7.
[217] Ibid., p.43.

criteria for determining which selves deserved such attention. The persistence of confidence as a central concern even within conservative backlash speaks to its significance in people's lives as a way of understanding both the individual in society and society itself. As Laura Tisdall and Peter Cunningham observe, 'there was both continuity and change in the anti-progressive "backlash" against progressivism'.[218] Given the progressive emphasis on self-esteem as a precursor to attainment in the 1970s described earlier, the traditionalist approach might be better understood as a consolidation of the idea that children's self-feeling ought to be geared towards socially-sanctioned measures of success, including academic attainment. This was a limiting moment in ideas about how children ought to meaningfully derive a sense of personal value. Self-feeling was once again tied to ideas about responsible, valuable citizenship.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has traced the remarkable persistence of self-feeling as an educational policy concern in England across six transformative decades, from the 1920s through to the 1970s. Throughout periods of profound educational change, from tripartite selection, comprehensive reorganisation, progressive child-centredness and conservative backlash, self-feeling remained a consistent yet malleable framework through which educators and policymakers conceptualised the relationship between individual worth and social membership. While self-feeling was not the primary justification driving post-war reconstruction, it maintained a subtle but consistent presence in educational debates, part of what Teri Chettiar identifies as the 'emotional dimension' of post-war reconstruction, particularly the emergence of 'preventing emotional harm' as a state objective.[219]

Although ideas about the social significance of self-feeling were prevalent in progressive education before the Second World War, the post-war period bore witness to the concept's political malleability. Self-feeling served successive and contradictory purposes, initially justifying educational separation to protect vulnerable children, subsequently critiquing that same selective system as psychologically harmful, then repositioning as therapeutic remedy, before finally being reframed by conservatives as something earned through achievement

[218] Peter Cunningham, *Curriculum Change in the Primary School since 1945: Dissemination of the Progressive Ideal* (London: Falmer Press, 1988), p. 213 cited in Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, p.216.
[219] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.7.

rather than unconditionally affirmed. This evolution reflected broader shifts in public understanding of educational purpose and its emotional obligations to children.

However, consensus about how to organise education in the interest of preserving children's self-esteem eluded policymakers. The policy of separate educational trajectories, designed to shield pupils from damaging comparisons, collapsed when no genuine parity of esteem materialised between tracks. Educational structures purportedly protecting pupils were instead exposed for reproducing the emotional harm they sought to prevent. Children's own testimonies revealed acute awareness of how institutional hierarchies determined not only academic opportunities but their status as valued community members, creating distinct subcultures centred on notions of self-worth that mirrored broader class divisions in emotional opportunity.

These contradictions provided ammunition for critics who interpreted injuries to self-feeling as symptomatic of broader social inequalities and problems. The most experimental reformers responded with therapeutic interventions targeting self-esteem as both symptom and solution, though educational psychologists' attempts at direct intervention yielded limited success. The elevation of self-esteem as an isolated educational objective made it an increasingly contested terrain. By the late 1960s, progressives questioned the substance behind schools' promises of enhanced confidence, viewing such commitments as having 'rather tenuous relationship' to classroom reality.[220] Self-esteem was also targeted by traditionalists who painted a picture of a spoilt, indulgent generation where self-worth was arbitrary. They preferred and promoted a model of earned and meritocratic self-image, rooted in responsible citizenship. This was picked up in official policy by the late 1970s and increasingly linked to policy targeting older children preparing for employment, tied to notions of responsibility.

Thus, self-feeling was politically malleable rather than the subject of consensus. This did not reflect conceptual vacuity but rather the powerful notion that society and social organisation wielded significant influence over individual self-regard. This psychological vocabulary provided a means for articulating persistent anxieties about social cohesion, educational purpose, and national progress, offering a framework through which to negotiate the delicate balance between individual needs and collective welfare. For this reason, self-feeling survived wildly shifting public moods about education. While there was significant disagreement about methods, outcomes, and sources of self-esteem, very few commentators

[220] Department of Education and Science, *Children and Their Primary Schools*, p.186.

argued that individual self-feeling ought to be sacrificed to society – with the exception of the most extreme traditionalists in the Black Papers. This supports arguments by Emily Robinson and colleagues locating a popular individualism with 'multiple political and cultural valences' before the rise of Thatcherism.[221] The concept of self-feeling provided a broad psychological vocabulary for persistent anxieties about social cohesion, educational purpose, and the relationship between individual and society.

The next chapter shifts from national to local scale, examining specific grassroots initiatives that placed self-feeling at the centre of their efforts to supplement mainstream education during the 1960s and 1970s. This analysis seeks to reveal in greater detail the complex ways in which self-feeling could serve simultaneously as a framework for both compassionate and limiting conceptualisations of childhood emotional wellbeing, demonstrating that self-feeling was not applied uniformly to all children and often reproduced constrained ideas about children and childhood.

[221] Robinson et al, 'Telling Stories', p.268.

4. Grassroots Education and Formations of Childhood Confidence, 1960s – 1980s

The previous chapter examined how self-feeling became a subject of growing interest and contention within mainstream education by the 1960s. This chapter explores how that same interest manifested at the grassroots level, where practitioners and theorists increasingly identified children's self-esteem as a crucial lever for broader social transformation. As Matthew Thomson observes, this period witnessed unprecedented attention to childhood 'emotional and social' wellbeing, reflecting wider cultural shifts in how British society understood the relationship between individual psychology and collective progress.[1]

By the 1960s, many parents and educators felt that existing institutions were failing to meet children's emotional and social needs. Comprehensive schools, despite reform efforts, remained constrained by examination pressures and institutional bureaucracy. The eleven-plus examination was increasingly criticised for 'cramping the education' of primary school children, with its emphasis on 'speed at the expense of thought', creating education that was 'narrow, impoverished in substance and overloaded with repetitive exercises'.[2] A Ministry of Education publication expressed particular concern about the psychological impact on young children, warning that 'premature concern' with competitive examinations was generating significant 'anxiety' in young children.[3] This educational malaise occurred within what Thomson identifies as the post-war extension of wartime social settlement to embrace 'the emotional security of the child'.[4] Early childhood experiences were now understood as crucial for lifelong wellbeing, positioning parents and educators as responsible for children's psychological and social futures. As Steven Mintz argues, parents by the 1970s were increasingly concerned about preparing children for 'post-modern society', where definitions of success had shifted to emphasise individual accomplishment and upward mobility. This

[1] Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, p.95.
[2] Ministry of Education, *Primary Education*, p.75.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, p.17.

created what Mintz describes as a 'fundamental tension' based on 'contradictory ideals' of protection and competition in the complicated adult world.[5]

Against this backdrop, grassroots initiatives emerged to address what many perceived as a crisis in childhood emotional development. This chapter examines three apparently disparate movements that placed self-esteem at the centre of their missions for social change. The Pre-School Playgroups Association (PPA) grew from scattered informal groups in the early 1960s to a nationwide network serving half a million children annually by the late 1970s.[6] These groups emerged from maternal frustration with limited state provision and concerns about children's social and emotional readiness for formal schooling. Outdoor education initiatives expanded beyond traditional scouting organisations to encompass radical experiments in communal living and environmental education. These camps positioned authentic selfhood as incompatible with capitalist society, seeking to create temporary communities where young people could rediscover their 'natural' authentic selves. Finally, workshops for disabled school-leavers emerged as awareness grew of their systematic exclusion from mainstream educational and employment pathways. These programmes approached self-esteem as requiring careful calibration – enough confidence to foster independence, but not so much as to create unrealistic expectations about disabled people's place in society. These diverse initiatives reflected what Peter Mandler describes as the 'decentralised' structure of post-war British education, which allowed 'changing attitudes' to travel 'from the bottom up'.[7] Despite their different areas of focus, all three movements shared a conviction that cultivating children's self-esteem could drive meaningful social transformation.

To understand how these disparate movements operated within shared assumptions about childhood and self-esteem, this chapter employs the concept of 'emotional formations'. As Vallgårda and colleagues explain, emotional formations are patterns that permit multiplicity and are characterised by 'high degree of diversity across space, class, ethnicity, age and gender'.[8] They exist through 'reiterated everyday emotional practices' and depend on individuals learning 'imparted codes of feeling'.[9] Unlike 'emotional communities' or

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[5] Steven Mintz, 'Why History Matters: Placing Infant and Child Development in Historical Perspective', *European Journal of Developmental Psychology* 14.6 (2016), pp.651-2.
[6] Ann Henderson and Joyce Lucas, *Preschool Playgroups: The Handbook* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1981), p.ix.; p.1.
[7] Peter Mandler, *The Crisis of Meritocracy: Britain's Transition to Mass Education since the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.7.
[8] Vallgårda et al, 'Emotions and Global Politics', p.20.
[9] Ibid., pp.20-21.

'regimes' which imply coherence, emotional formations allow for 'internal variation' and contradiction while maintaining 'certain overall hierarchies of feeling' alongside a 'high degree of diversity across space, class, ethnicity, age and gender'.[10] Formations give scope for understanding how enthusiasm for self-esteem did not translate into uniform applications of the idea to different types of children.

The movements examined here constituted distinct but comparable emotional formations centred on a new conceptualisation of healthy childhood. Each defined healthy child development in terms of healthy self-regard. They also prescribed specific roles for adults as architects of children's self-esteem, dictating how confidence should be cultivated, measured, and managed. This chapter argues that these grassroots movements represented a simultaneously compassionate and limiting approach to children's emotional development. They demonstrated genuine concern for children's psychological wellbeing while inadvertently excluding many children from their vision of healthy development. Each movement positioned specific types of children in specific environments as emotionally healthy and resilient, leaving others outside their conception of proper emotional development. The playgroup movement's emphasis on environmental exploration and physical mastery privileged able-bodied children while requiring maternal psychological literacy. Outdoor education celebrated wilderness skills that reinforced masculine-coded visions of authentic development while struggling to transcend class barriers despite explicit commitments to equality. The Bristol workshops explicitly constructed disabled young people as requiring fundamentally different approaches to confidence-building, channelling them towards predetermined roles through therapeutic interventions that presented limitation as psychological adjustment.

These case studies reveal how self-esteem had transcended expert psychology to become embedded in common discourse while remaining politically charged and filled with hopes for social change. They are not an exhaustive account of the diverse ways in which grassroots movements in England utilised self-esteem in their work. A notable missing example are Black Supplementary Schools, established across England in the same period – these are explored in detail in the final chapter of this thesis. The selection of movements presented here are chosen as illustrative rather than complete, and demonstrate how a demographically and geographically diverse set of movements attempted to harness self-esteem for social

[10] Ibid., p.20.

progress while inadvertently revealing its conceptual limitations when applied instrumentally by adults for their own ends. Through examining their emotional formations of self-feeling, this chapter illuminates how compassion could coexist with exclusionary practices through seemingly neutral psychological frameworks – a dynamic that helps shed light onto both the appeal and the limitations of self-esteem as a tool for social transformation in post-war England.

4.1 'Building Their Confidence First in Us, Then Through Us': Motherhood, Play and Self-Esteem

The first section of this chapter analyses the role of self-esteem in the burgeoning grassroots pre-school and playgroup movement from the 1960s until the 1980s. It explores how self-esteem was central to the play-based theories of child development articulated by play theorists looking to influence practitioners, and considers how ideas about self-confidence informed the goals of the wider movement and the shift away from attachment-based theories of child development.

In the post-war period, the psychologist John Bowlby's theory of maternal attachment underpinned popular understanding of children's emotional development and wellbeing. Teri Chettiar has highlighted how emotional injuries caused by evacuation during wartime channelled concern about the repercussions for children 'deprived of a normal home life'.[11] Bowlbyism confirmed and compounded this fear, and held that maternal love, affection and 'attachment' – sustained through the physical and emotional presence of a mother figure – was the root of healthy childhood development.[12] Indeed, Bowlby drew connections between mental illness and 'the absence of a stable maternal presence' in early childhood.[13] As Chettiar argues, state interventions in the post-war period focused on 'preventing deviations from an ideal male-breadwinning, female-homemaking model of loving family life'.[14]

By the 1960s, however, Mathew Thomson identifies a 'faltering confidence' in the family home as a site for healthy child development. This disillusionment was rooted in the clash of expectations as the Bowlbyist ideal of maternal homemaking was met with socioeconomic

[11] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.52.
[12] Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, p.79.
[13] Chettiar, *The Intimate State*, p.91.
[14] Ibid., p.54.

change that saw greater opportunities of employment for women. The pressure to uphold a Bowlbyist ideal, combined with other factors including poor mental health outcomes for those living in new high-rise accommodation, resulted in a growing sense of social isolation among mothers.[15] Sociological studies in the 1960s and 1970s reported on this sense of isolation, rooted in the dependency of young children on mothers, especially in inadequate housing. Hannah Gavron's posthumous 1966 inquiry into women and family life found that although women took seriously 'the responsibilities of motherhood', the prospect of paid employment 'often conflicted with desires to be good mothers'.[16] For many women, it no longer felt possible to meet the requirements of Bowlbyist attachment theories of childrearing.[17]

Compounding maternal isolation was inadequate state childcare provision for children under the age of five, despite proposals in the 1944 Education Act around nursery care and a 'bulge' in the number of children born in the 1950s and 1960s.[18] In response, from the early 1960s small groups of mothers began collaborating to establish pre-school facilities for under-fives. What began as a handful of groups in 1962 was provision for 83,000 children by 1968, supported by funding from the Department of Education and Science.[19] The Pre-school Playgroups (PPA) association was launched in 1961 and grew from approximately 1,500 affiliated groups in 1966 to 10,000 members by 1976 and 18,000 by the late 1980s.[20] This explosive development reflected not only practical need for childcare and support for mothers, but the emergence of a distinct philosophy of child development that placed social and emotional wellbeing at its centre. By the late 1970s, the movement had grown to serve half a million children annually, with practitioners Ann Henderson and Joyce Lucas characterising it as 'large, untidy, caring', having become 'a power in the land' that combined practical provision with political advocacy.[21]

As an early example of women's self-help, the PPA has been studied in relation to its emancipatory impact for the women involved, and in terms of its place in the pivot away from a Bowlbyist understanding of childrearing.[22] But the alternative framework of childcare

[15] Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, pp.95-7.
[16] Hannah Gavron, *The Captive Wife* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1966), p.73.
[17] Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, pp.95-7.
[18] Ibid., p.95.
[19] Ibid., p.97.
[20] Henderson and Lucas, *Preschool* Playgroups, p.ix; p.1.
[21] Ibid., p.ix; p.1
[22] Lynn Abrams, *Feminist Lives: Women, Feelings, and the Self in Post-War Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp.187-223.; Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, pp.79-105.

and development that it laid out for the children in its charge has rarely been explored. The PPA was one of the most significant grassroots innovations in post-war Britain and reflected an increasingly play-oriented approach to childrearing, centring emotion, independence and autonomy within carefully defined boundaries.[23] This was not a new concept – Friedrich Froebel was a notable advocate of children's play for healthy development in the eighteenth century – but play took on new impetus in the final decades of the twentieth century when it was linked to a host of socially desirable outcomes, including educational attainment, the prevention of anti-social behaviour, and wellbeing.[24] Among play theorists involved in the PPA, these outcomes included overcoming maternal isolation, as well as the practical issue of guaranteeing reliable childcare provision for the under-fives.[25]

Within the PPA, play theorists promoted an integrated emotional formation of self-esteem which focused simultaneously on the self-confidence of the isolated mother, and that of the developing child. Many of the structures seen to isolate the mother were also understood as threats to the child's self-image. This was one way in which some members of the PPA attempted to reconcile what Abrams describes as a 'conflict between motherhood and selfhood'.[26] The rest of this section explores the distinctive emotional formation of self-esteem employed by theorists involved in the playgroups movement. It was a formation that was emancipatory and limiting. On one hand, its dual emphases on the child's independence and autonomy, and the importance of maternal self-confidence, offered freedom through childrearing. On the other, it upheld the role of the adult caregiver as a mediator of a child's self-image, and the emphasis on freedom, exploration and environmental mastery made the play-based model of self-esteem implicitly the reserve of able-bodied, male children. Furthermore, it was a largely middle-class movement, and its emphasis on self-confidence and child development theory possibly overlooked the need of working-class women to earn income, and who lacked time for translating childrearing theory into practice.[27] The work of the theorists analysed below wanted their voices heard, and their publications were largely

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[23] Thomson, *Lost* Freedom, p.142. Mathew Thomson documents a growing interest in 'specialised landscapes' of play for children in the post-war period that existed alongside heightened parental anxieties about the outside world'

[24] Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, p.95.; Elizabeth Wood, 'The Capture of Play Within Policy Discourses: A Critical Analysis of the UK Frameworks for Early Childhood Education', in *International Perspectives on Children's Play*, ed. Jaipaul Roopnarine, Michael Patte, James Johnson, and David Kuschner (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2015), pp.222-3.

[25] Davis, *Modern Motherhood, p.38.* Angela Davis characterises what the PPA provided for women: 'While playgroups did not offer an alternative to full-time motherhood, they did provide women with the opportunity for social contacts, work outside the home and a break from their children, all of which were very welcome.'

[26] Abrams, *Feminist Lives*, p.223.

[27] Ibid., p.184.; p.178.

designed to convince and influence playgroup leaders. They should not be taken as representative of the views or the practices of the disparate pre-school groups that accommodated half a million children by the end of the period covered here.[28] This is an additionally important caveat given David Cowan's observation that working-class families in post-war Britain were more likely to tailor expert advice to their own circumstances rather than accept it at face value.[29] Indeed, the PPA itself promoted this kind of bespoke application. Women in the movement were encouraged to tailor messaging to their own groups, based on an understanding of the individual children in their care. In a similar vein, the PPA retained a central emphasis on the personal development of the mother, often prioritising her intuition and experience over rigid prescription to theories of child development.[30]

Nevertheless, the play theorists studied here were usually themselves playgroup leaders and wrote for other women based on their personal experiences. Their writing illuminates a relatively under-explored aspect of the play movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, historians have noted that although the movement has been characterised as middle-class, it was not 'exclusively' so. Working-class women attended and led playgroups, and provision was established in areas of relative deprivation, as well as in the suburbs and in small villages.[31] As Thomson argues, the pre-school movement 'was not simply a case of middle-class feminists picking up on the revisionist research', but was a practical, 'grassroots response' to palpable shortcomings in state provision for young children and the implications of a movement away from longstanding notions of maternal attachment that increasingly left women feeling 'trapped'.[32] The messaging of those within the movement who wanted their voices heard helps demonstrate what women involved in do-it-yourself self-help wanted for both themselves and their children, their hopes and fears for the next generation, and the gaps and deficiencies they perceived in state provision at the time.

Within the playgroups movement, the inadequacy of state provision for under-fives was not framed as problematic on purely practical grounds. The PPA linked the absence of nursery or pre-school places to what it perceived to be systemic neglect of early development. By the mid-1960s, only three per cent of children under five attended any sort of nursery

[28] Henderson and Lucas, *Preschool Playgroups*, p.ix; p.1.
[29] Cowan, '"Modern" Parenting', p.346.
[30] Brenda Crowe, cited in Abrams, *Feminist Lives,* p.207.
[31] Davis, *Modern Motherhood*, p.38.
[32] Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, p.97.

establishment, with many of these being day nurseries for working mothers rather than educational facilities focused on developmental needs.[33] Ruth Johns, an early practitioner in the playgroup movement, characterised this situation as creating 'a pyramid with a pinnacle constantly attended while the broad base is overlooked', reflecting how British education prioritised secondary and higher education whilst neglecting the foundational years.[34] This shortfall coincided with emerging research emphasising the first five years as vital for psychological and intellectual development. J.W.B. Douglas' influential 1964 study *The Home and the School* highlighted how 'in the pre-school years the mental development of many children is stunted by the intellectual poverty of their surroundings', providing empirical support for arguments that early intervention could address educational inequality.[35] Government responses to these concerns remained limited. Despite the Plowden Report's assertion that the playgroup movement constituted a 'cycle of opportunity', the government maintained what Johns called an 'embargo on nursery school expansion', failing to provide adequate state resources for early childhood education.[36] In 1966 Johns warned that 'poor nurture in this period can profoundly affect the development of a child and affect both its emotional stability and its attitude to learning', positioning pre-school provision not merely as convenience for parents but as essential for children's lifelong wellbeing.[37]

Concern for children's development within the PPA manifested as a distinct philosophy of child development centred on the emotional and social wellbeing of mother and child. The movement's intellectual development was shaped by several key figures who translated psychological theory into ideas for practical implementation. Brenda Crowe, the PPA's first national adviser and organiser, articulated the movement's philosophy through widely-read handbooks and training materials. Practitioners Ann Henderson and Joyce Lucas also published an influential handbook on playgroups.[38] Janet November provided practical examples of playgroup leadership through her memoir of running a home playgroup, demonstrating how theoretical frameworks could be adapted to specific contexts.[39] Alison Stallibrass offered crucial theoretical legitimacy through her influential work *The Self-Respecting Child*, which drew on observations from the Pioneer Health Centre in 1950s

[33] Ruth Johns, 'The Playgroup Movement in Britain', *The Educational Forum* 30.2 (1966), p.189.
[34] Ibid.
[35] James Douglas, *The Home and the School: A Study of Ability and Attainment in the Primary School* (1964), cited in Johns, 'The Playgroup Movement', p.189.
[36] Johns, 'The Playgroup Movement', p.190.
[37] Ibid., p.189.
[38] Henderson and Lucas, *Preschool Playgroups*.
[39] Janet November, *The Story of a Home Playgroup* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1980).

Peckham, and the playgroup she ran from her living room. The study established an explicit connection between spontaneous play and healthy self-development.[40] These practitioners created a body of accessible expertise that democratised psychological knowledge whilst establishing new forms of professional authority over children's emotional development.

Among play theorists a key concern centred on creating environments for healthy emotional development. They lamented rapid urbanisation that had 'robbed children of certain basic rights', noting that even affluent areas like the South-East were becoming 'an urban desert' as countryside disappeared beneath new developments.[41] Urban planning came under particular criticism from playgroup practitioners and theorists for prioritising adult convenience over children's developmental needs. Johns characterised working-class urban children as 'doubly handicapped', living in 'poor quality homes' and attending schools 'built in the last century' that often lacked outdoor play spaces and proper facilities.[42] High-rise housing developments were condemned for treating children as 'prisoners in the air', living in constructions built 'with no consideration for children's needs' where automobile storage received greater priority than play areas.[43]

Their analysis mirrored a growing body of sociological literature that pointed to urban and particularly high-rise living as problematic for children's development. Hannah Gavron's survey of family life exposed a desire among working-class mothers in flats for more nursery provision, not to '"dump" the children' but to give them opportunities for socialising and emotional development. One mother responded: 'I would like him to meet some other children, and get out of this flat. He's no company to play with and the whole day is spent at home alone with me'.[44] Similarly, Pearl Jephcott's study of 'High Flats' in Glasgow reported parents and teachers finding that children living in high rise accommodation were developmentally delayed relative to their peers, pointing to their being 'reluctant talkers and oddly uncurious about each other'. They also lacked 'general information' and were generally less sociable: 'all told it would seem that life in a multi-storey runs counter to what the psychologist say about the child's needs'.[45] The report found that this was intertwined in

[40] Alison Stallibrass, *The Self-Respecting Child: Development through Spontaneous Play* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974).
[41] Henderson and Lucas, *Preschool Playgroups*, p.2.
[42] Johns, 'The Playgroup Movement', p.190.
[43] Ibid., p.191-2.
[44] Gavron, *Captive Wife*, p.73.
[45] Pearl Jephcott, *Homes in High Flats: Some of the Human Problems Involved in Multi-Storey Housing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1971), p.96.

mothers' concerns about their own abilities and wellbeing, finding that mothers 'criticised themselves as being so tetchy with the children', enmeshed in fears about their children's safety with hazards such as stairs and balconies to contend with: 'they sensed wrong with their current life but felt powerless to put right'.[46] This was echoed in Hilda Jennings' 1962 survey which found that caring for 'vigorous under fives who demanded active play' in small flats 'caused stress and strain' on the part of mothers.[47]

One of the primary emotional injuries of modern urban living for children seemed to be a depletion of self-confidence and sociability, as well as a dependency on mothers that directly impacted maternal mental health. As such, the social and emotional wellbeing of both mothers and children was central for theorists trying to influence training and practice in the PPA. The PPA focused heavily on addressing the emotional injuries of motherhood including what was perceived to be their depleted self-esteem. Ann Henderson and Joyce Lucas argued that although the Women's Liberation Movement had supported 'the development of the more assertive woman in public', little had been done to improve 'the self-esteem of the woman as a mother'.[48] They framed maternal participation in playgroups as 'a vehicle for her personal growth, a means to develop her self-confidence', identifying the 'low social and economic status' attached to motherhood as undermining women's self-regard.[49]

The solution proposed by playgroup practitioners was one that held the personal development of children and mothers in tandem. Key to enhancing the self-confidence of mothers was the development of psychological expertise that would enable them to improve the self-confidence of their children through play. Janet November's reflection on her playgroup experience exemplified this dual focus on maternal and child development. She described involvement in playgroups as helping mothers as much as children by creating 'a chance to be a person who is not "just a mother" or "just a housewife"' through applying their talents to serve a greater purpose.[50] November held that the practice of careful observation, environmental management, and responsive adaptation required by playgroup practice provided mothers with evidence of their own competence whilst addressing what she identified as maternal depression from being 'somewhat housebound' with little time for themselves, leading to depleted self-confidence 'in themselves as individuals and in their

[46] Ibid., pp.97-8.
[47] Hilda Jennings, *Societies in the Making* (1962), cited in Gavron, *Captive Wife*, p.83.
[48] Henderson and Lucas, *Preschool Playgroups*, p.11.
[49] Ibid., p.16-17.
[50] November, *Story of a Home Playgroup*, pp.24-5.

ability to do anything other than housework and catering for the family'.[51] Play theorists therefore had a dual motivation when planning for the training of parents and playgroup leaders through the PPA. On one hand, they needed to present accessible, comprehensible and applicable knowledge of child development for playgroup leaders to deliver an effective service. On the other, they retained a central focus on the personal development of mothers, balancing complex theory with learning from intuition, personal experience, and child-centred observation.

The PPA's educational initiatives represented a remarkable expansion of psychological literacy, with Henderson and Lucas noting that 40,000 parents annually attended playgroup courses on children and learning by the early 1980s.[52] This widespread engagement with developmental theory substantially altered the landscape of psychological expertise, positioning mothers as active interpreters and implementers of scientific knowledge rather than passive recipients of professional advice. The movement's approach to psychological knowledge was strategically selective, drawing on respected theories whilst adapting them for practical application. Janet November's incorporation of Jean Piaget's work on symbolic play exemplified this selective translation. November used Piaget to explain to her readers the importance of enhancing children's self-confidence, citing the role of play in helping children 'accept unpleasant or difficult experiences' and 'accept himself more easily'.[53] The emphasis placed on academic psychological expertise was important for the wider reputation of the PPA, ensuring that it could be distinguished from what Ruth Johns dismissively termed 'child-minders' who were seen as profit-focused and lacking 'regard or understanding of the needs of small children beyond the physical requirement of keeping them safe'.[54]

But for all its emphasis on theoretical insight, the movement balanced psychological expertise with maternal authority and intuition, explicitly encouraging practitioners to maintain confidence in their own observational abilities whilst engaging seriously with developmental research. Brenda Crowe emphasised that 'new ideas should be tested by all the people concerned, not imposed without question', validating maternal judgement as legitimate alongside scientific knowledge.[55] Playgroup leaders were encouraged to draw on their personal childhood experiences, particularly recalling adults who had made *them* feel

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[51] Ibid., p.28.
[52] Henderson and Lucas, *Preschool Playgroups: The Handbook*, p.1.
[53] November, *Story of a Home Playgroup*, p.110.
[54] Johns, 'The Playgroup Movement', p.194.
[55] Brenda Crowe, *Play is a Feeling* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1983), pp.12-13.

'happy and confident', positioning mothers as uniquely qualified to recognise authentic self-esteem through their own emotional histories.[56]

This integration of theory and experience positioned effective playgroup practice as requiring both knowledge of general developmental principles and sensitivity to specific contexts and individual differences between children. Janet November's approach exemplified this integration through her systematic documentation of children's responses to different activities combined with immediate adaptation of those activities to individual needs, demonstrating how theoretical knowledge could be filtered through direct observation and practical experience.[57] Crowe's commendation of November's ability to 'learn from them and to adapt to their needs' illustrated the movement's ideal of responsive application rather than rigid adherence to theoretical frameworks.[58] As Lynn Abrams has observed, leaders in the movement developed a philosophy that centred personal growth and individual insight at the expense of specific 'professional standards'.[59] The positioning of playgroup leaders – almost always mothers – as natural and expert curators of emotional security necessary for healthy self-esteem development was part of a reciprocal relationship of confidence-building that was central to the playgroup philosophy. By gaining expertise over managing children's self-confidence and developing scrupulous understanding of their emotional needs, it was anticipated that women would gain significant psychological benefits, creating what amounted to a mutual relationship of self-esteem building between mothers, playgroup leaders and children.

Another rationale behind the balanced approach between theory and intuition was the emphasis placed on children's self-confidence as a vehicle for their independence. Not only was independence framed as a child development goal in its own right, but it was also framed as a way of easing the burden on mothers. The PPA espoused the idea that self-confidence was an important aspect of healthy child development. Henderson and Lucas warned that 'when the seeds of failure are allowed to grow in early childhood, we reap an expensive harvest of social sickness in later years', positioning early intervention as social insurance against future difficulties.[60] Alison Stallibrass extended this analysis by connecting inadequate self-confidence to various undesirable behaviours, from 'boastfulness and

[56] Brenda Crowe, *Your Child and You* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1986), p.4.
[57] November, *The Story of a Home Playgroup*, p.xvii.
[58] Brenda Crowe, 'Foreword', in November, *The Story of a Home Playgroup*, p.ix.
[59] Abrams, *Feminist Lives*, p.207.
[60] Henderson and Lucas, *Preschool Playgroups*, p.2.

arrogance' to 'bossiness and bullying', which she interpreted as compensatory mechanisms for damaged self-esteem.[61] More explicitly still, Stallibrass hypothesised a direct causal relationship between lack of self-respect and delinquency, suggesting that children with underdeveloped self-esteem might engage in destructive behaviours to assert themselves until becoming labelled 'out of control' or 'delinquent'.[62] This pathologising framework created urgency around confidence-building whilst establishing playgroup practitioners as essential early intervention specialists. The movement thus positioned itself as addressing not merely educational needs but fundamental threats to individual psychological health and social stability.

More specifically for the mothers in the PPA, self-confident independence was also linked to easing children's dependency, and thus alleviating some of the 'stress and strain' of motherhood. This was exemplified in Janet November's description of her rationale for a confidence-centred approach in her playgroup. She explained that her aim was to guide children 'towards independent living, so that they become self-confident and as little dependent on me as possible'.[63] This idea also gained traction in the Ministry of Education from the late 1950s. A 1959 Ministry of Education publication on primary education positioned 'a reasonable degree of self-confidence' as essential for young children leaving 'the safe security of the home' to adjust successfully in the wider world, warning that children who failed to develop this confidence by age five would harbour 'a persisting sense of deprivation' and be rendered unable to reach their full human potential.[64]

In terms of how playgroup leaders ought to foster confidence and independence in children, theorists suggested reducing the amount of adult interference in children's play, as far as was reasonably practicable. Play and spontaneous activity were positioned as the optimum routes to self-respect and healthy childhood. Ann Henderson and Joyce Lucas challenged dismissive attitudes towards play as 'frivolous and trivial', asserting instead that it constituted 'a physical and intellectual and emotional necessity' for children.[65] This reflected a Montessorian elevation of play's status that positioned it as children's fundamental work – 'what [the child] has to do in order to become himself' – rather than mere entertainment or

[61] Stallibrass, *The Self-Respecting* Child, pp.194-5.
[62] Ibid., pp.262-3.
[63] November, *Story of a Home Playgroup*, p.33.
[64] Ministry of Education, *Primary Education*, p.16.
[65] Henderson and Lucas, *Preschool Playgroups*, p.166.

time-filling activity.[66] Stallibrass provided the most rigorous theoretical framework for understanding play's psychological functions through her observations of children's spontaneous activities at the Peckham Centre. She argued that 'being oneself' was a fundamental human capacity requiring regular exercise through self-directed activity and spontaneous play.[67] Children needed opportunities to act on their own initiative and under their own direction to develop authentic self-knowledge and confidence in their own capabilities. Constant adult governance would deprive children of developing 'a mind of his own', essentially leaving them with 'no self' at all.[68] Freedom, autonomy and self-governance were therefore framed as fundamental to healthy self-confidence rooted in true independence from adult authority.

Stallibrass was particularly critical of the role that adults inadvertently played in stifling children's autonomous activity. She used historical analysis to contrast contemporary restrictions with children's relative freedom in previous eras. She acknowledged the stringency of Victorian behavioural expectations but argued that Victorian children were typically controlled 'for a certain proportion of the day' whilst 'for the rest of the time, they were able to be where they were neither heard nor seen by censorious adults'.[69] In Stallibrass' vision, it was vital to healthy child development that children exist apart from their adult caregivers. She suggested that even demanding Victorian parents were 'less worried about the dangers into which their small girls might run if allowed out of their sight' than contemporary parents who increasingly supervised children's every activity.[70] In this vein, Janet November developed a minimal intervention philosophy in her rural playgroup. Here, adults needed to create conditions where children's natural confidence could emerge without excessive interference. This approach demanded sophisticated knowledge of child development combined with careful restraint in applying that knowledge, requiring what Crowe described as learning 'how to balance expertise, specialised knowledge, common sense and sensitivity' in specific contexts.[71]

Playgroup practitioners were thus tasked with cultivating a double dose of self-confidence – for themselves as women *and* for the children in their care. This was often framed as a dual

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[66] Ibid.
[67] Stallibrass, *The Self-Respecting Child*, p.180.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., p.212.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Crowe, 'Foreword', p.x.

mission. Brenda Crowe described how maternal self-confidence needed to be cultivated first and foremost, such that children could develop that same sense of self-assuredness needed for independence and resilience:

> There are so many unpleasant experiences ahead of them that it surely makes sense to make time in these early months and years to build up their confidence first in us, then through us, so that eventually they have confidence in themselves to deal with the unknown and unexpected.[72]

Alison Stallibrass also took this approach. She argued that adults should function as 'caterers' of self-esteem, responsible for providing the 'mental and emotional nourishment' children needed for their 'basic and essential faculties' to develop properly.[73] This metaphor captured the delicate balance required to facilitate rather than dictate children's development, ensuring children received appropriate resources without having predetermined structures imposed upon them. Adults needed to develop an understanding of childhood self-confidence, maintain relevant equipment, observe children's responses, and adjust environmental conditions whilst avoiding the temptation to intervene directly in children's chosen activities. This represented a distinctive emotional formation that was rooted in psychological theory, as well as intuitive and personal experiences of the importance of self-confidence, both for mothers and children. This was an integrated vision of self-feeling whereby maternal self-confidence was attached to the mother's or playgroup leader's ability to pass this onto children in her care. Here, the internal emotional experience of self-esteem was replaced with a model of self-confidence rooted in a child's abilities to adjust to the world and maintain resilience in the face of adversity.

In order for mothers and playgroup leaders to assume their role as self-confidence 'caterers', they needed to curate appropriate environments for spontaneous activity and autonomous play. Stallibrass' influence was particularly significant in establishing causal connections between environmental conditions and psychological outcomes. Her analysis of the Peckham Centre provided empirical evidence that children developed healthier self-concepts when given freedom to pursue spontaneous activities without constant adult direction.[74] The ideal play space was one in which children could exercise their physical capabilities with minimal adult intervention, developing self-respect through physical accomplishment. Stallibrass

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[72] Crowe, *Play is a Feeling*, p.11.
[73] Stallibrass, *The Self-Respecting Child*, pp.214-22.
[74] Ibid., p.199.

warned that children unable to meet physical milestones would be left with 'a sense of inadequacy and an inhibiting fear', effectively positioning physical limitations as inherent obstacles to confidence and healthy self-development.[75] Similarly, Henderson and Lucas reinforced these exclusionary assumptions through their assertion that physical competence was fundamental to psychological wellbeing. They warned that 'a child – or adult – who is not at home in his own body certainly has nowhere else to go', framing bodily confidence as prerequisite for all other forms of self-esteem, creating insurmountable theoretical barriers for children whose bodies functioned differently.[76]

This emphasis on physical mastery reflected the movement's broader environmental philosophy that privileged outdoor, explorative play over play confined to the indoors. November described 'the outside world of plants growing, of soil and sand and gravel and stones, where rain leaves puddles or snow leaves a whole new world' as the context that 'stimulates the children most, the natural world'. This romanticisation positioned natural environments as inherently more conducive to authentic confidence development than modern, seemingly artificial settings.[77] Testament to the movement's commitment to safe outdoor spaces for play, Mathew Thomson cites instances of 'radical and community political agitation' through the groups, including instances where play providers tried to 'take over unused private gardens' to use as makeshift playgrounds.[78] Indeed, outdoor space was particularly important given the movement's positioning of physical mastery as fundamental to self-esteem and emotional wellbeing. Henderson and Lucas argued that physical competence was fundamental to psychological wellbeing, asserting that children needed opportunities to 'swing and run and jump' to develop both physical confidence and spatial understanding.[79] Stallibrass' description of authentic self-respect being 'enhanced if he knows that he is capable of shinning up a drainpipe or a lamp-post, or of hauling himself over a high wall or leaping a lower one'.[80]

Theorists were critical of other environments that seemed to stifle children's 'natural' curiosity. Janet November echoed well-worn criticisms of post-war schools when she contended that there were 'far too many children to provide a stimulating environment for

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[75] Ibid., p.195.
[76] Henderson and Lucas, *Preschool Playgroups*, p.168.
[77] November, *The Story of a Home Playgroup*, p.90.
[78] Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, p.97.
[79] Henderson and Lucas, *Preschool Playgroups,* p.168.
[80] Stallibrass, *The Self-Respecting* Child, p.199.

their young explorers'. She went on to argue that 'too many rules and regulations' similarly constrained the autonomy of the young child.[81] Alison Stallibrass also positioned formal education as actively harmful when it denied children opportunities for spontaneous, self-directed activity. She warned that children could be 'seriously harmed by being starved of food for their faculties and by the disregard of their wishes', with such harm intensifying as children aged and faced increasing constraints on autonomous action.[82]

In reality, the idealised vision of independent play as a route to children's self-respect was limited by a number of factors. Despite efforts to acquire outdoor space, many playgroups existed in urban areas and were confined to living rooms and community halls, lacking the kind of nature that theorists like November thought of as ideal for fostering inquisitiveness and exploration. Alison Stallibrass recognised the limits of her own vision of freedom, noting several prevalent fears among parents that had resulted in what she perceived to be a 'censoring' of children's spontaneous activity: the disappearance of 'bomb site' playgrounds replaced by parked cars, the decline of adventurous play in parks supplanted by supervised family walks, changing perceptions about children's 'mischief', the rise of consumerism, road traffic growth, and increasing fears about 'sex maniacs'.[83] These developments were seen as cumulatively creating an environment where children became increasingly subsumed under parental supervision, almost becoming 'extensions of their parents' selfhood' rather than developing autonomous identities.[84] For Stallibrass this constituted a distinctly modern 'tragedy', describing environments where children's attempts at 'independence or adventure and experiment are frowned upon'.[85] This created what she identified as a fundamental incompatibility between children's developmental needs and modern parenting constraints, where 'a happy and successful relationship with their parents is incompatible with a successful relationship to their physical environment – one excludes the other'.[86]

Even the ideal of independent self-confidence was limiting for the children concerned. The movement's emphasis on physical mastery and environmental competence as foundations for authentic self-respect revealed profound limitations in its vision of emotional health, implicitly privileging able-bodied children capable of demonstrating autonomy through

[81] November, *The Story of a Home Playgroup*, p.34.
[82] Stallibrass, *The Self-Respecting Child*, p.6.
[83] Ibid., p.214.
[84] Ibid., p.212.
[85] Ibid., p.182.
[86] Ibid., pp.198-9.

bodily achievement while marginalising those whose capabilities differed from these normative expectations. These exclusionary assumptions would prove particularly significant as confidence-building initiatives expanded beyond pre-school provision into more demanding physical environments, where the relationship between environmental mastery and self-esteem became even more explicitly central to definitions of healthy childhood development.

Nevertheless, in establishing self-confidence as a remedy for maternal isolation and an organising principle for an alternative vision of early development, the playgroups movement represents an intriguing experimental moment for self-confidence as a force for social change. Within the PPA it was used as a framework for understanding the negative consequences of social isolation, as well as a tool through which it might be overcome. Unlike much of the discourse in education policy, the self-esteem of children was intertwined with considerations about the self-esteem of adults. Ultimately the endeavour was arguably more liberating for adults than children, who remained subject to limited freedoms and growing anxieties about their safety outdoors.[87] But it did mark a burgeoning relationship between children's social and emotional needs and the possibility of social change. Elizabeth Woods observes that in the latter part of the twentieth century in the UK, play entered policy discourse and was increasingly attached to a range of 'preventative, reparative, and restorative interventions'.[88] The link between self-confidence, freedom, and alternative worldviews was also pursued in the more radical context of outdoor education, explored in the next section.

4.2 'Head, Heart and Hand': Self-Confidence in Outdoor Education

Other grassroots movements also isolated self-esteem as an important factor to their objectives in the 1970s. Outdoor education initiatives in this period were radical experiments in confidence-building that explicitly challenged the material and emotional norms of capitalist society. This section explores the distinctive emotional formation that emerged within one such initiative, Flysheet Camps, which positioned nature-based, primitive living as a means of resisting encroaching capitalist modernity. For the leaders of Flysheet,

[87] Abrams, *Feminist* Lives, p.184. As Lynn Abrams argues, it is unlikely that self-confidence as an end goal was sufficient for working-class mothers in the movement who likely found independence through paid employment rather than voluntary participation centred on personal development.
[88] Wood, 'The Capture of Play', pp.222-3.

competition, materialism and social hierarchies prevented authentic self-knowledge and true self-esteem. In Flysheet's romantic critique of the modern world, self-confidence was something to be rediscovered, a natural and primitive part of a childhood that could be reclaimed through experiencing life in the outdoors.

Flysheet Camps formally launched in 1973, but the camps were part of a much longer lineage of outdoor education in Britain. Flysheet Camps were a spin-off of the wider Forest Schools organisation. Forest Schools emerged in the context of interwar concern about industrialisation and automation, as well as an understanding of childhood development rooted in 'recapitulation' theory. Recapitulation theory held that children required closeness to 'their natural roots' in order to develop healthily. It was a model of child development that linked stages of childhood to stages of civilisation. Early childhood represented the most 'primitive' stage, and thus children needed to be exposed to natural, basic living in order to develop most effectively. The industrial, capitalist world was understood as a direct threat, particularly for children. Experiences of the First World War compounded fears about the fate of civilisation and prompted pioneers of outdoor education to search for a remedy.[89]

The solutions were influenced by the work of British-Canadian author Ernest Thompson Seton, whose move to Canada in the 1860s had exposed him to First Nations culture. Seton's perception of indigenous culture centred on 'close-knit community' and a 'closeness to nature'. Seton established a movement named 'Woodcraft Indians' which focused heavily on 'adventure training', mimicking much of what he reported from his visit to Canada.[90] His ideas were published extensively in Europe from the late nineteenth century and influenced a host of movements centred on the outdoors and primitive living. One of Seton's disciples was Ernest Westlake, who was a major proponent of recapitulation theory. Together with Seton, Westlake established the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry in England in 1916. It had strong Quaker ties and rescinded connection to politics and religion. In the 1920s, other groups branched off, including the Kibbo Kift Kindred in 1920, the Woodcraft Folk in 1925, the Peace Militia, and the Forest School in 1929 – established by Westlake's son, Aubrey.[91]

Between 1929 and 1940, the Forest School began as a small collective based in Hampshire. Teachers taught creative arts and literacy, and promoted outdoor activities including tree climbing, camping and hiking to small groups of children. Survival skills and lessons about

[89] Lucy Jaffe, 'A Short History' in *Our Story: 50 Years Under Canvas with Forest School Camps* (1998), p.2.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid., pp.2-3.

the environment were regular features of the school's curriculum, and at least half of the school day was spent in the outdoors.[92] Outdoor education initiatives were all deeply concerned with delivering a natural education that supported the self-development of children. Forest School shared the progressive, outdoor commitment that the 'three Rs' be replaced with three Hs: 'head, heart and hand', reflecting the importance of 'wisdom and skill' over 'facts and figures'.[93]

As the school grew in the 1930s, organisers sought new premises and bought Whitwell Hall in Norfolk until it was requisitioned by the military in 1940. Forest School relocated again to Dartington Hall in Devon – the site of another notable progressive school experiment which ultimately 'overshadowed' the Forest School which subsequently closed.[94] Following wartime disruption, Forest Schools organisers set out to re-launch the programme in 1947, with a handful of summer camps taking place in the late 1940s. The new summer camp model proved popular in the 1950s when 'a large number of people with left-wing ideas' began sending their children during the summer holidays. By the 1960s, Forest School Camps had doubled in size. Organisers cite the 1960s and 1970s as 'an era when more and more people were looking for an alternative to urban living' and were growing disillusioned by state education provision.[95]

With the growth of the movement in the 1970s, several splinter groups formed, the most successful of which was Flysheet Camps. Flysheet was more radical in its vision, and more explicitly political than its Quaker-inspired parent organisation. The splintering stemmed from growing dissatisfaction within the established Forest School Camps. By the late 1960s, younger members had grown concerned about what they perceived as the organisation's increasing bureaucratisation and middle-class respectability, which they felt contradicted its founding commitments to social equality and radical education. The organisation's leaders viewed the Forest School Camps as becoming increasingly preoccupied with maintaining a 'respectable image' and 'structural hierarchy' that undermined its potential for social transformation.[96] Flysheet Camps launched in 1973 to assert a more radical pedagogical programme and to expand access to working-class children who remained underrepresented in outdoor education. Alan Emmerson, a key Flysheet organiser, positioned the initiative as

[92] Ibid., p.3.
[93] Ibid., p.2.
[94] Ibid., p.4.
[95] Ibid., p.5.
[96] Institute of Education Archives, FLY/8, 'Flysheet: Second Issue', 1973.

rejecting 'charitable, do-gooding, social welfare' approaches that reinforced existing power relationships, arguing that mainstream institutions were 'part of the problem' for the way they 'categorised and labelled' people. Those at Flysheet were 'not keen to play their game'.[97]

Operating primarily in the Midlands and North of England, Flysheet Camps served children aged six to sixteen through week-long residential experiences that brought together communities of 60 to 80 participants deliberately balanced across age and gender. With financial support from progressive funding bodies and staff contributions, Flysheet maintained low costs to promote accessibility for working-class families, often organising camps in partnership with social workers whilst choosing rural locations in close proximity to urban centres to minimise travel expenses.[98] The organisation's structure embodied its anti-hierarchical principles through collective decision-making processes that enabled participants as young as six to contribute equally to camp-wide decisions, with leadership roles rotated based on 'experience and ability, and not on age'.[99] Flysheet's radical approach was underpinned by an eclectic mix of progressive pedagogy and anarchist politics that reflected broader countercultural movements seeking to combine political radicalism with alternative approaches to education and community organisation.[100] Organisers described their educational method as having 'no teachers and no taught, because there is nothing to teach, there is only learning'.[101]

Flysheet Camps were also committed to the recapitulation theory that underpinned much of the outdoor experimentation in the period between the wars. The recapitulation framework enabled Flysheet organisers to position their 'primitive' camping methods not as educational preferences but as developmental necessities aligned with children's natural growth patterns, providing quasi-scientific legitimacy for their belief that authentic selfhood could only emerge through primitive living conditions that enabled children to pass through 'the main historical cultural stages from the Stone Age to the high levels of the Greeks'.[102] Flysheet's commitment to recapitulation informed their approach not only to education, but to the self-development of its campers. It positioned authentic self-knowledge and self-esteem as natural facets of selfhood to be reclaimed through outdoor living and exposure to the elements. It was

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[97] Institute of Education Archives, FLY/4, Alan Emmerson, 'Draft for an Introduction to Flysheet Camps for People who Know Nothing about FSC, etc', undated.
[98] Alan Emmerson, 'An Open Air Community', *Self and Society* 2.1 (1974), p.14.
[99] FLY/8, 'Flysheet: Second Issue'.
[100] Emmerson, 'An Open Air Community', p.14.
[101] FLY/8, 'Flysheet: Second Issue'.
[102] Institute of Education, FLY/8, 'Flysheet: First Issue', 1972.

a sentiment rooted in compassion but would ultimately create normative expectations about authentic development that would prove exclusionary for children who could not fully participate in wilderness-based activities.

In a 1998 history of Forest School Camps, including Flysheet, the author Lucy Jaffe proudly commented that very little had changed between the camps at the end of the twentieth century and those that had existed some fifty years before.[103] While Flysheet retained many aspects of the original vision, including its commitment to recapitulation and the benefits it saw in the natural world, it located much of its critique in the specific context of 1960s and 1970s Britain. The movement positioned contemporary selfhood as fundamentally alienated, shaped by media images, educational hierarchies, and social competition rather than genuine self-knowledge and environmental engagement. The camps' organisers identified several mechanisms through which modern society corrupted natural self-development, establishing the foundation for their alternative approach to confidence-building through primitive living and communal organisation.

Consumer culture was condemned for promoting superficial identity markers that prevented genuine self-understanding whilst creating dependence on external approval. The critique of 'getting dolled up' and 'flash clothes' reflected broader concerns about how material culture prevented authentic self-discovery whilst reinforcing competitive individualism.[104] Educational systems were understood to reinforce these patterns by reducing children to test scores and behavioural categories, denying them 'equal opportunity to be different' whilst preparing them for predetermined economic roles rather than autonomous self-discovery.[105] Flysheet president Ron Brand described schools as 'factories' that treated children as 'imperfect adults' requiring transformation into uniform 'commercially valuable' citizens.[106] Alan Emmerson articulated the movement's concern that social categorisation prevented authentic identity formation by forcing people to 'forget who [they] really are', with labels like 'awkward teenager' and 'delinquent' functioning not as neutral descriptions but as powerful tools of social control that limited children's self-conception and developmental possibilities.[107]

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[103] Jaffe, 'A Short History', p.2.
[104] Institute of Education, FLY/8, 'Flysheet: Three & Four', 1973.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.
[107] FLY/4, Alan Emmerson, 'Draft for an Introduction', undated.

The movement's analysis of inauthenticity extended to emotional expression and interpersonal relationships within capitalist society. The camps' organisers argued that competitive individualism forced people to develop 'defensiveness' and 'pretensions of being "bigger" and "better" than other people', preventing genuine human connection whilst promoting shallow 'ego boosts' derived from material displays or social superiority.[108] Capitalist society's 'economic system of competitiveness' was seen as forcing individuals to erect 'sexual, emotional and social barriers' between individuals, creating isolation and preventing authentic human connection.[109]

This critique extended beyond formal institutions to encompass family structures and urban environments that organisers saw as preventing authentic self-development. Nuclear families were criticised for encouraging insularity whilst reinforcing power imbalances that transformed children into parental 'property', creating 'claustrophobic and stultifying' experiences that forced young people to 'accept the values and life-styles of his parents' or risk 'rejecting the love that has brought him into the structure of society as a well-bred person'.[110] Rather than supporting healthy identity formation, families were seen as preventing children from discovering their authentic selves whilst serving adult needs for vicarious achievement.

Technology and mass media also received specific condemnation for creating what organisers described as 'second hand' experiences that prevented direct engagement with reality. One veteran organiser reflected on behavioural differences between pre-television and post-television children, observing that 'life for all children these days has become second hand […] it's become a vicarious living'.[111] This mediated existence was contrasted with the direct, embodied experiences that Flysheet positioned as necessary for authentic self-development. The movement developed a comprehensive environmental analysis that positioned modern urban life as fundamentally incompatible with healthy psychological development, regularly condemning what organisers described as 'automated, pre-packed humanity' living under a 'soft euphoric totalitarianism' that suppressed individuality through institutional control and technological mediation.[112]

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[108] FLY/8, 'Flysheet: Three & Four'.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Eliza Banks, 'Early Days', in *Our Story: 50 Years Under Canvas with Forest School Camps* (1998), p.13.
[112] FLY/8, 'Flysheet: Three & Four'.

In Flysheet's analysis, it was the teenager who was most at risk of developing an inauthentic sense of self. Adolescence was framed as a critical period for identity formation requiring specialised intervention and escape from artificial modern constraints. The movement positioned teenagers as particularly vulnerable to modern society's alienating effects whilst simultaneously possessing unique potential for developing authentic selfhood through appropriate experiences and environmental conditions. This age-based analysis established adolescence as requiring temporary removal from normal social constraints to enable natural developmental processes to unfold, providing the justification for their alternative educational provision whilst positioning mainstream institutions as systematically incompatible with healthy psychological development. The movement's critique was particularly focused on how labels targeted at teenagers acted as barriers to authentic selfhood, with organisers arguing that terms like 'awkward' and 'delinquent' prevented young people from discovering their true capabilities and potential.[113]

In the Flysheet model, true self-understanding and self-esteem were obscured or replaced by structures designed to promote competitiveness, obscuring childhood selves behind social labels and adult authority, compounded by a disconnect from the natural world. Where the PPA had espoused similar ideas in relation to its promotion of childhood independence, within Flysheet authentic individuality was just as important self-sufficiency. Instead of the re-imagined home environments designed around children's emotional and social needs that were common in the playgroups movement, Flysheet camps offered a more radical model that was explicitly critical of the home, the city, and even the family as sites of healthy development. As a remedy for the alienating influence of modern society and its impact on children's self-development, Flysheet developed a distinctive approach to confidence-building that sought to create authentic self-esteem through systematic dismantling of social hierarchies, primitive living experiences, and collective responsibility. The movement's practical interventions were designed to counteract the specific mechanisms of alienation they had identified whilst providing alternative pathways to genuine self-knowledge and environmental competence.

One of Flysheet's most radical interventions involved the systematic elimination of traditional social hierarchies and categorical distinctions that organisers believed prevented authentic self-development. The camps implemented specific organisational practices

[113] FLY/4, Alan Emmerson, 'Draft for an Introduction', undated.

designed to remove age-based authority structures, gender stereotypes, and class distinctions that were seen as imposing artificial limitations on children's potential whilst reinforcing broader social inequalities. The rejection of adult-child hierarchies was the movement's most distinctive organisational feature, challenging conventional assumptions about children's capabilities whilst creating opportunities for young people to experience genuine authority and responsibility. In contrast to schools where the teacher was cast as an 'omnipotent individual', camp environments enabled participants as young as six to contribute equally to camp-wide decision-making through daily morning meetings. Leadership was rotated and decentralised, with responsibility distributed based on experience rather than on chronological age.[114] This democratic approach created what organisers described as genuine community where 'every person, however young or whatever their background, is as important as anybody else', with participants helped to take care of one another and share responsibilities.[115]

Gendered divisions also received attention from organisers. Flysheet Camps adopted practices designed to challenge traditional role assumptions that organisers believed limited authentic self-development and individuality. Staff guidance specifically encouraged male adults to take on emotional and caring responsibilities traditionally assigned to women, whilst promoting cooperative rather than competitive activities that avoided reinforcing masculine stereotypes. Camp leaders were advised to discuss co-education with male participants whilst encouraging boys to take caring roles with younger campers, creating opportunities for alternative expressions of masculinity and relationship.[116]

Class-based distinctions were also addressed through rejection of material status markers and emphasis on collective rather than individual achievement. Campers did not wear uniforms or display personal possessions, whilst activities emphasised cooperation and mutual support rather than competition or individual advancement. This approach was designed to create environments where participants could discover their authentic capabilities without interference from external social expectations or economic advantages. The organisation attempted to address financial barriers by reducing costs and arranging specific camps in

[114] FLY/8, 'Flysheet: Second Issue'.
[115] Institute of Education, FLY/7, 'An Introduction to Flysheet Camps', undated.
[116] Institute of Education, FLY/4, Information Sheets for Staff, undated.

collaboration with social workers, choosing locations to limit travel expenses whilst charging adults to attend as staff members.[117]

Central to Flysheet's confidence-building approach was their emphasis on 'primitive' living conditions that required participants to develop practical skills and environmental competence through direct engagement with basic survival needs. The camps' activities centred on 'the basic business of living together in the open, sleeping on the ground in tents, cooking on open fires and so on', positioning these tasks not as recreational challenges but as essential developmental experiences necessary for authentic self-understanding.[118]

This emphasis on primitive living was grounded in recapitulation theory and the movement's contention that modern technological society prevented children from developing genuine relationships with their physical environment and bodily capabilities. By 'consciously and deliberately placing [themselves] in a primitive situation', campers were 'forced to pay attention to basic biological requirements', creating authentic experiences contrasted with 'the agency of complicated instruments and mysterious technologies'.[119] Through removing modern conveniences and requiring participants to address basic needs through direct action, the camps sought to restore what they saw as natural human capacities that had been suppressed by artificial living conditions and technological dependence. Flysheet's critique of technology was linked to broader concerns about authenticity and self-knowledge, with technological mediation seen as preventing the direct sensory engagement with environment that organisers believed was necessary for developing genuine self-understanding and confidence.

Unlike the organisation's decision-making structures, the camps' approach to corporeal knowledge was systematically age-graded, with different expectations for participants at various developmental stages. Younger campers aged six to nine focused on basic skills including tent operation, personal care, fire-making, and simple cooking, whilst older participants took on more complex challenges including shelter construction, advanced outdoor skills, and leadership responsibilities within the camp community. This developmental progression was designed to build confidence through mastering increasingly sophisticated environmental challenges whilst demonstrating genuine competence rather than

[117] Emmerson, 'An Open Air Community', p.14.
[118] FLY/4, Alan Emmerson, 'Draft for an Introduction' undated.
[119] Emmerson, 'An Open Air Community', p.14.

artificial achievement.[120] Flysheet's emphasis on environmental mastery and corporeal knowledge drew explicitly on romanticised perceptions of indigenous North American practices, reiterating early pioneers' admiration of 'adventure training' that enabled young people to 'prove themselves' through 'lighting fires, stalking animals, sleeping out alone, dancing and self-reliance in the wild'.[121] This appropriation reflected broader romantic traditions that idealised indigenous societies as embodying natural human potentials that had been suppressed by industrial civilisation. The camps' approach to environmental challenge was designed to provide what organisers termed 'genuine' rather than artificial difficulties that required participants to develop real capabilities rather than merely following predetermined procedures, with the harshness of outdoor conditions valued for creating authentic learning situations where success required genuine adaptation and skill development.[122]

Despite its emphasis on individual authenticity and self-reliance, Flysheet's approach to confidence-building was also fundamentally communal in outlook. The movement explicitly positioned itself against competitive individualism, arguing that authentic self-worth could only emerge through contributing to collective wellbeing rather than personal achievement at others' expense. This social orientation was embedded in all aspects of camp organisation and daily life, creating what organisers described as 'the feeling of collectivity which reflects the cooperative spirit of the community'.[123] Participants' testimonies reflected the powerful impact of this communal approach on their developing sense of self-worth and social capability. One former camper described the experience of 'working together for the benefit of everyone' as 'marvellously exhilarating' and making it 'much more easy to express oneself in these surroundings', citing the possibility of mutual understanding as fundamental to community feeling.[124] Another recalled how camp participants 'knew we were each a valuable if individualistic part of our groups' within an uncompetitive environment defined by 'recognition of each and every member's contribution and mutual nurturing', whilst recognising that these groups were 'dependent upon others to form the whole camp – a microcosm of the outside world'.[125]

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[120] Institute of Education, FLY/8, 'Flysheet: Number 7', 1977.
[121] Jaffe, 'A Short History', p.2.
[122] Emmerson, 'An Open Air Community', p.14.
[123] FLY/8, 'Flysheet: Three & Four'.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Bridget Bos, '1950 Tracker', in *Our Story: 50 Years Under Canvas with Forest School Camps* (1998), p.10.

The camps' confidence-building approach was explicitly contrasted with what organisers understood to be competitive mainstream education that framed individual success as dependent on others' failure. As one former camper remembered, the camps created opportunities for achievement 'not to be top dog over others, as so often in school or work environment but rather to be top dog for oneself', emphasising personal development within supportive community contexts rather than individual advancement through social competition.[126] This communal dimension was seen as essential for developing authentic confidence grounded in genuine relationships rather than artificial social performance, creating temporary communities where participants experienced genuine interdependence and mutual support that demonstrated alternative possibilities for social organisation and individual development. Flysheet developed a formation of self-esteem rooted in the belief that self-understanding could be gleaned from nature. Self-esteem was something natural to be reclaimed, both through individual effort and practising self-sufficiency, and through collective, communal effort and living. Indeed, it was this collective understanding of self-esteem that resonated most with former campers.

Despite its radical rhetoric of inclusion and anti-hierarchical organisation, Flysheet operated within romantic frameworks that constructed particular visions of authentic childhood whilst marginalising alternative expressions of youth and development. The movement's emphasis on primitive living, physical challenge, and environmental mastery created implicit norms about appropriate adolescent development that privileged certain forms of embodiment and capability whilst excluding others from full participation in their community of self-esteem. These limitations revealed the persistent gap between inclusive rhetoric and exclusionary practice that characterised even politically progressive initiatives.

Flysheet's approach to gender equality revealed significant tensions between egalitarian rhetoric and persistent masculine-coded assumptions about authentic development and environmental competence. Despite explicit efforts to challenge traditional gender roles through encouraging male emotional expression and female leadership, the movement continued to privilege traditionally masculine-coded activities and capabilities. The camps' theoretical foundation in romanticised indigenous practices where young people could 'prove themselves' through physical challenges reflected cultural traditions that associated authentic selfhood with masculine ideals of environmental mastery and bodily autonomy.[127] Staff

[126] Ibid.
[127] Jaffe, 'A Short History', p.2.

guidance documents revealed ongoing struggles with gendered labour divisions despite explicit commitments to equality, with organisers noting that male staff members tended to abandon nurturing responsibilities to women, contradicting principles about dismantling gender-based role divisions. These patterns reflected how deeply ingrained assumptions about appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour proved resistant to ideological intervention and alternative community organisation.[128] The Flysheet emphasis on rejecting consumer culture and artificial identity markers also carried gendered implications that could marginalise participants who used material culture or appearance as important dimensions of identity expression, with the critique of 'getting dolled up' potentially dismissing feminine forms of creative self-expression whilst celebrating more masculine-coded forms of authentic engagement with environment and community.

Despite emerging amidst critique of Forest School Camps' middle-class orientation and explicit commitments to expanding working-class access, Flysheet struggled significantly with the practical challenges of transcending class barriers to participation. The movement's organisers were notably self-conscious about their failure to attract working-class children through normal recruitment processes, acknowledging that their camps 'largely fail[ed] to attract children from socially disadvantaged homes' despite their political commitments and practical efforts to address financial barriers.[129] The camps' reliance on referrals from social workers and local authorities for working-class participants created tensions with their broader critique of social welfare systems as mechanisms of categorisation and control. Yet by 1977 organisers acknowledged that whilst more working-class children were attending Flysheet than Forest School Camps, these were often specifically selected through institutional gatekeepers rather than through 'open door' recruitment, meaning that access remained mediated by professional assessment of need or risk rather than family choice.[130]

Furthermore, camp literature revealed that it was not expected that people from large urban centres would attend camps. One commentator referenced 'a surprising number of people, particularly "townies"' being 'amazed when they find they can enjoy it too', betraying underlying assumptions that positioned urban-dwelling children as disconnected from supposedly natural experiences, with camps offering a corrective to this deprivation whilst

[128] FLY/4, 'Information Sheets for Staff'.
[129] FLY/8, 'Flysheet: Number 7'.
[130] Ibid.

risking the pathologisation of urban childhoods rather than recognising them as equally valid contexts for development.[131]

Finally, the movement's anti-consumerist ethos, critique of formal education, and romantic environmentalism were articulated through countercultural and new left discourses that assumed particular forms of cultural literacy and political orientation. Ultimately, they contributed to a sense that the splinter group had failed to overcome the middle-class tendencies of the wider Forest School Camp organisation. One disillusioned participant criticised Flysheet as 'a load of trendy pseudo-intellectuals' jumping on ideological bandwagons, highlighting tensions between radical rhetoric and cultural practice that reflected broader middle-class countercultural movements of the period.[132]

In the 1970s, grassroots organisations increasingly attempted to use notions of self-confidence as a framework through which to understand symptoms of inequality and a disillusionment with aspects of the modern world. Progressive experimentation with the idea that self-esteem could be part of the solution tended to fall short of their idealistic ambitions, suggesting that self-esteem could not drive change while separate from the broader structural context. Nevertheless, ideas about self-feeling helped inform frameworks for wider radical initiatives that resonated in the lives of their participants. It was part of the radical, progressive story, if not the entire story.

A singular focus on self-esteem as an emancipatory aim without contextualising social inequalities could be damaging more than liberating, even in initiatives centred on compassion and childhood liberation. Although not explicitly acknowledged by its organisers, Flysheet's theoretical foundation in recapitulation theory was particularly exclusionary for disabled children, as it naturalised a linear developmental progression that positioned physical mastery and environmental autonomy as essential markers of authentic maturation. The belief that children needed to recapitulate evolutionary stages through wilderness skills and primitive living created normative expectations about bodily capability that left little room for alternative forms of competence or contribution. It was part of a wider understanding of child development that positioned self-esteem as a marker of healthy personhood, its absence the sign of pathology and deficiency. Similarly, it positioned the root to self-esteem as active, physical participation with the environment, culminating in a sense

[131] FLY/4, Alan Emmerson, 'Draft for an Introduction'.
[132] FLY/8, 'Flysheet: Second Issue'.

of accomplishment, achievement, and mastery. The camps' celebration of primitive skills, wilderness competence, and physical self-reliance drew on cultural traditions that associated authentic humanity with environmental mastery and bodily autonomy, creating frameworks that would fundamentally exclude disabled participants from its conception of healthy self-esteem and authentic development whilst reinforcing broader cultural assumptions about the relationship between physical capability and human worth. Next, this chapter turns to consider an initiative designed to support children with disabilities in the same period, to understand how limited understandings of self-esteem were applied to support *and* to limit the opportunities available to children and young people who did not fit neatly into categories of normal or 'healthy' development.

4.3 'Springboards, Not Pillows': Self-Confidence, Disability and Work

The two movements explored in this chapter so far used self-esteem in their experiments with progressive ideas about child development as a route to social change. Both movements embraced the idea that allowing children to develop positive self-regard in the right environment was a part of healthy child development and could have transformative social implications. We now turn to another initiative in the same period that was designed to support older children in the transition from education to employment. The Bristol Council for the Disabled ran workshops which specifically served disabled young people in the city. Here too, self-confidence was a guiding principle and organising framework for workshop leaders, but it was employed in even more limiting terms. Workshop leaders wanted to ensure workshop attendees experienced success and accomplishment, but overconfidence was discouraged. In line with government discourse about disabled youth which increasingly focused on the need for independence and self-sufficiency to mitigate welfare dependency, by the late 1970s these aspects of self-feeling were prioritised over instilling an innate feeling of worth in the young workers.

The Bristol workshops emerged from the convergence of post-war developments that repositioned work as a site of psychological rehabilitation and created new institutional frameworks for managing people with disabilities. Drawing direct inspiration from post-war industrial therapy units pioneered in hospitals for ex-servicemen and psychiatric patients, the workshops represented the translation of wartime rehabilitation efforts into permanent frameworks for therapeutic intervention. By the mid-1960s, industrial therapy had achieved

such widespread acceptance in psychiatric settings that few hospitals operated without such facilities. The units promoted an understanding of work as fundamentally therapeutic, as well as economic, activity.[133] Around the same time, The Bristol Crippled Children's Society, founded in the 1920s to support physically disabled children through casework and advocacy, adapted its focus in response to changing social conditions and emerging gaps in statutory provision. As state services absorbed many of the Society's earlier functions, organisers identified a new need: training for disabled school leavers deemed unfit for further education or conventional vocational courses. In 1964, the Society opened a small workshop on Lower Park Row, moving in 1967 to a purpose-fitted site on Whiteladies Road that was shared with the Bristol Council for Disabled Adults.[134]

The workshops' institutional development reflected broader policy changes that repositioned voluntary organisations as essential components of disability provision. The 1970 Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act gave local authorities responsibility for providing comprehensive services for disabled people whilst explicitly encouraging voluntary organisations to play central roles within this expanded framework.[135] The Bristol organisations used this legislative support to continue and expand their occupational training work, accepting boys and girls of school-leaving age (15, rising to 16 in 1972) alongside referrals from Youth Employment Officers who judged young people 'quite unfit for employment' without specialised intervention.[136] Participants included children with physical impairments such as epilepsy, cerebral palsy, and heart conditions, as well as those with cognitive impairments described in terms of 'emotional disturbance' and 'educational subnormality', though the workshops deliberately avoided detailed diagnostic categorisation, with staff preferring minimal advance information so that children would not arrive 'with labels already attached'.[137]

Staff at the workshops was made up of a combination of paid workers, seconded teachers, and trained volunteers who brought different forms of expertise to bear on participants'

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[133] Office of Health Economics, 'Progress in Mental Health', February 1966.
[134] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/R/3, Bristol Council for the Disabled, 'Report by the Chairman of the Bristol Council for Disabled Adults', c.1965.
[135] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/M/5, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report and Extract From Audited Accounts for 1971, Chairman's and Secretary's Report', 1971.
[136] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report and Extract from Audited Accounts for 1972', 1972.
[137] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled, Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/R/5, 'The Use of Small Occupational Workshops as Work Training Centres for Handicapped School-leavers: a Report on the Workshops Run by the Bristol Council for the Disabled', October 1973.

emotional and vocational development.[138] The emphasis on creating 'homely' atmospheres that combined warmth with firm structure positioned staff as quasi-parental figures responsible for emotional nurturing alongside behavioural modification, expanding their authority beyond technical training to encompass fundamental aspects of personality development and character formation.[139] The workshops enjoyed institutional recognition through regular referrals from Youth Employment Officers, special schools, and social workers who recognised workshop expertise in managing 'difficult' cases that mainstream provision could not accommodate.[140]

The workshops operated through carefully structured work programmes that began with simple repetitive tasks designed to ensure immediate success for participants who had supposedly 'experienced only failure' in their lives.[141] Young people progressed from basic handwork such as labelling box files, pressing cardboard pieces, and packaging matches through to operating simple machinery. Unlike occupational therapy approaches that prioritised personal satisfaction regardless of product value, workshop practices demanded 'acceptance of industrial discipline, and a product of economic value, whose quality must meet normal commercial standards'.[142] The workshops reported completion of thousands of labels, cardboard pieces, and painted matches annually, with organisers arguing that such repetitive work was 'stimulating' for disabled participants rather than 'soul-destroying' as it would be for 'people of average intelligence', revealing fundamental assumptions about disabled young people's capacities and appropriate occupational trajectories.[143]

The workshops operated on the fundamental assumption that disabled young people suffered from inherent deficits in self-esteem. Their supposed lack of self-confidence was framed as a natural consequence of disability, and became a primary therapeutic target requiring professional intervention within carefully managed boundaries. This diagnostic framework positioned low confidence not as a reasonable response to structural barriers or limited opportunities, but as symptomatic of disability itself, creating a rationale for psychological intervention whilst obscuring social and environmental factors that contributed to disabled

[138] 41645/Adm/M/5, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report', 1971.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report and Extract from Audited Accounts for 1979', 1979.
[142] Office of Health Economics, 'Progress in Mental Health'.
[143] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/M/5, Bristol Council for the Disabled, 'The BCCS Workshop for Handicapped School-leavers', c.1967.

young people's sense of marginalisation. In the workshops' annual reports, descriptions of the children's emotional development was tracked and recorded as evidence of progress. Here, workshop organisers consistently characterised participants through vocabularies of emotional and developmental inadequacy, with directors describing young people arriving with 'little or no ability, self-confidence, self-discipline or motivation', establishing deficiency as the baseline condition requiring transformation through therapeutic intervention rather than recognising such responses as adaptive to experiences of systematic discrimination.[144]

The workshops' diagnostic framework drew heavily on psychological theories of compensation that positioned disabled young people as trapped between pathological deficiency and pathological excess, requiring careful management to achieve appropriate emotional balance. This theoretical approach interpreted apparent confidence or assertiveness as 'attention-seeking' behaviour that masked underlying insecurity rather than genuine self-assurance, creating paradoxical therapeutic standards that simultaneously demanded confidence-building whilst constraining the expression of confidence when it exceeded staff expectations.[145] The description of a boy given the pseudonym 'Ian', characterised as 'emotionally immature to a degree that made employment quite impossible', exemplified this diagnostic approach. It described Ian as displaying aggression, attention-seeking tactics, and resentment of criticism that workshop staff interpreted as compensatory mechanisms for deep-seated insecurity rather than reasonable responses to institutional constraint.[146] Similarly, 'Jane' was found to also express her insecurity through 'attention-seeking' behaviour whilst being 'sensitive and rather temperamental', her emotional reactions understood as symptoms requiring management rather than communications deserving response.[147]

Central to this pathologisation was the assumption of emotional fragility that permeated workshop practices through systematic documentation of participants' vulnerability and behavioural inadequacy. 'Sally', whose stammer limited her communication, became 'so scared that she became ill' during a factory visit – a response treated as typical rather than exceptional of disabled young people's capacity for workplace integration.[148] 'Arthur' was

[144] 41645/Adm/R/1, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report', 1979.
[145] 41645/Adm/R/1, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report' 1972.
[146] Ibid.
[147] 41645/Adm/R/5, 'The Use of Small Occupational Workshops', 1973.
[148] 41645/Adm/M/5, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report', 1971.

characterised as ‘a very nervous boy’ whose family provided ‘no support’ and who was therefore ‘not ready to cope with employment’.[149] ‘Leslie’ was described in similar terms as ‘delicate’ and ‘depressive’, requiring careful management to prevent emotional collapse when faced with workplace pressures or criticism: workshop leaders ‘had to be very careful not to speak sharply or he would burst into tears’.[150] This highlighted some of the tensions between therapeutic protection and practical preparation for discriminatory workplace cultures that lacked patience for emotional reactions.

These individualised assessments operated within broader frameworks that positioned disabled young people as fundamentally different from their non-disabled peers in terms of emotional capacity and developmental potential. Workshop literature consistently invoked the notion that participants had ‘known little but failure all their lives’, creating a narrative of accumulated psychological damage that justified therapeutic intervention on the basis that disabled young people were inherently vulnerable to emotional harm.[151]

Furthermore, the workshops approached emotional assessment with the assumption that disabled young people lacked sufficient maturity for full self-realisation. Workshop annual reports linked confidence deficits to what staff termed ‘years of prolonged childhood’ that had prevented disabled young people from developing age-appropriate emotional skills and social competencies, with ‘backwardness’ and ‘immaturity’ described as ‘negative habits and attitudes of mind’ that rendered participants incapable of employment without extensive psychological intervention.[152] The diagnosis of immaturity was often linked to family dysfunction and parental misjudgement, with workshop reports citing family relationships, particularly ‘overprotectiveness’ of parents, as fundamental obstacles to appropriate confidence development that required professional intervention and systematic correction. When ‘S’ arrived as an ‘incredibly shy and timid boy’, directors attributed this to being ‘kept lovingly wrapped in cotton wool’ by well-meaning but misguided parents whose protection had prevented appropriate emotional development.[153] The 1975 Chairman’s Report stated that ‘the sympathy which overprovides, overprotects and expects very little of them is not a help

[149] Ibid.
[150] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, ‘Annual Report and Extract from Audited Accounts for 1977’, 1977.
[151] 41645/Adm/R/5, ‘The Use of Small Occupational Workshops’, 1973.
[152] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, ‘Annual Report and Extract from Audited Accounts for 1974’, 1974.
[153] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, ‘Annual Report and Extract from Audited Accounts for 1984’, 1984.

but a hindrance', advocating for 'self-help schemes' that would foster appropriate confidence through structured challenge rather than familial comfort and acceptance.[154] This critique suggested that young people with disabilities required fundamentally different emotional preparation than their non-disabled peers. Overprotectiveness was to be replaced by 'self-help' that would prevent disabled young people transitioning from familial dependency to state-dependency. Self-esteem and a degree of independence were positioned as the keys to breaking this pattern of reliance.

In order to help attendees overcome their supposed dependence and self-esteem deficit, the workshops developed specific approaches to confidence-building that prioritised creating emotionally intimate environments designed to facilitate psychological transformation through carefully managed relationships and environmental control. Staff deliberately maintained small group sizes, working with no more than twelve young people daily to ensure individual attention whilst creating what organisers described as spaces 'small enough to provide a feeling of intimacy so that each individual matters and knows that he matters'.[155] The commitment to emotional nurturing in the workshops was clear. Workshop organisers believed that participants required 'affection, fun and laughter' within carefully controlled environments that combined therapeutic warmth with clear behavioural expectations and systematic progress monitoring.[156]

From foundations of therapeutic intimacy, the workshops also implemented systematic, routinised approaches to confidence-building through carefully calibrated work experiences designed to ensure initial success whilst gradually increasing challenge and responsibility. The approach began in 'hand repetition departments' that provided simple, repetitive tasks designed to be accessible to even the most 'helpless' of newcomers, positioning immediate achievement as psychologically essential for participants who were perceived to have had limited experiences of success and achievement.[157] Tasks were deliberately designed for universal initial success, with workshop organisers justifying extremely basic activities – labelling box files, pressing cardboard pieces, packaging matches – as therapeutically appropriate for disabled young people who required different approaches than their non-disabled peers, arguing that such repetitive work was understood to be appropriately

[154] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report and Extract from Audited Accounts for 1975', 1975.
[155] 41645/Adm/M/5, Bristol Council for the Disabled, 'The BCCS Workshop', c.1967.
[156] Ibid.
[157] 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report', 1979.

'stimulating' for these children.[158] This systematic approach was designed to ensure that 'every individual can keep experiencing achievement', with participants prevented from becoming complacent at any single task through work continually adjusted to match their developing capabilities whilst demonstrating appropriate attitudes toward challenge and responsibility as signs of growing maturity.[159]

Important in this confidence-building system was protection from failure, with staff creating environments where success was relative, praise was frequent, and comparison was minimised to preserve fragile self-esteem whilst building confidence through accumulated positive experiences. However, comparisons were strategically deployed when staff deemed them therapeutically useful to cultivate more 'realistic' outlooks, with 'Roland' receiving deliberate recognition for physical tasks to boost confidence whilst others faced comparison when staff judged they had developed 'exaggerated sense of achievement' requiring deflation through exposure to more realistic assessments.[160] The management of criticism and failure revealed fundamental contradictions in workshop philosophy between protecting vulnerability and developing workplace resilience, exemplified by 'Leslie's' extreme sensitivity requiring staff to modify feedback carefully to avoid distress whilst simultaneously preparing him for employment environments where 'busy supervisors' lacked patience for emotional reactions.[161]

Although the workshops were ostensibly focused on building confidence, there were carefully prescribed limits to how confident workshop attendees were allowed to become, with staff viewing excessive self-assuredness as potentially more dangerous than deficiency. Keeping confidence within appropriate boundaries was deemed essential for ensuring participants did not develop what staff perceived to be unrealistic ideas about their capabilities or future prospects in the harsh 'real world', positioning professional judgement as necessary for distinguishing between healthy self-regard and delusional aspiration. This regulatory approach meant that confidence-building functioned not as empowerment but as calibration, training disabled young people to internalise realistic assessments of their limited opportunities whilst presenting such limitation as psychological adjustment rather than structural constraint.

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[158] 41645/Adm/M/5, Bristol Council for the Disabled, 'The BCCS Workshop', c.1967.
[159] 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS & BCDA, 'Annual Report', 1974.
[160] 41645/Adm/R/5, 'The Use of Small Occupational Workshops' October 1973.
[161] 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report', 1977.

The workshops articulated explicit connections between confidence-building and economic participation that positioned waged labour as both psychological necessity and moral obligation for disabled young people. Unlike occupational therapy approaches that prioritised personal satisfaction regardless of product value, workshop practices demanded commercially-viable standards of work. The workshop wage structure embodied this economic philosophy through careful distinction between 'pocket money' that was 'earnt' rather than provided as welfare support, with earnings directly proportional to individual productivity and output quality.[162] Workshop directors explicitly opposed flat-rate compensation, arguing it undermined 'the morale value of the money' by disconnecting earnings from individual effort and achievement, training disabled young people to internalise market logic as psychological imperative whilst linking self-esteem directly to productive capacity.[163] The 1965 annual report explicitly connected pay to self-concept, arguing that,

> The point that their money is definitely earned is extremely important. It gives them a new feeling of worth. They have an incentive to work fast and as they earn more, they have tangible proof of their own progress.[164]

This piece-rate system created mechanisms for psychological conditioning that positioned economic value as the measure of personal worth whilst obscuring structural barriers to disabled young people's employment and advancement. The emphasis on product quality served additional functions by using commercial success as evidence of participant development and therapeutic effectiveness, with workshop policy requiring all work to 'establish a reputation for doing any form of handwork to a high standard' as this would provide 'great morale value to the workers themselves'.[165] By the early 1980s, workshop reports prominently featured production statistics and sales figures alongside individual success stories, presenting market performance as both measure and generator of psychological worth whilst creating frameworks for assessing therapeutic success through economic rather than personal criteria, demonstrating how confidence-building had become fundamentally oriented towards producing economically viable workers rather than personally fulfilled individuals.

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[162] 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report', 1975.
[163] 41645/Adm/R/3, Bristol Council for the Disabled, 'Report by the Chairman', c.1965.
[164] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled, Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/R/3, 'Notes on the BCCS "Scheme for Handicapped School-Leavers"', c.1965.
[165] 41645/Adm/R/3, Bristol Council for the Disabled, 'Report by the Chairman', c.1965.

The workshops' approach to confidence-building required staff to develop expertise in distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate emotional responses whilst maintaining therapeutic authority over participants' psychological development and future prospects. Professional intervention operated through systematic observation and documentation of participants' emotional responses, with staff maintaining detailed records of behavioural change and psychological development that positioned workshop attendance as measurable therapeutic intervention rather than simple training or charitable activity. The workshops' approach to managing 'unrealistic' aspirations and overconfidence betrayed an implicit impulse of self-esteem regulation which required precise boundaries rather than general enhancement, with professional reports cautioning that 'physically handicapped youngsters (and their parents) rather easily get an unrealistic sense of their achievements which can lead to disillusionment and bitterness', whilst 'educationally subnormal youngsters may become bumptious with over-confidence', something deemed inappropriate and incompatible with the perceived limited opportunities open to disabled young people in 1970s England.[166] As such, workshop environments deliberately introduced workplace pressures to counter presumptuous confidence whilst preparing participants for employment contexts where they could neither 'show off' nor 'answer back' to supervisors, revealing assumptions about disabled young people's future positioning within hierarchical employment relationships whilst presenting such positioning as natural consequence of their limitations rather than discriminatory treatment requiring challenge or accommodation.[167]

From the 1970s, self-confidence was mobilised more explicitly by the workshops to serve neoliberal objectives that positioned individual psychological adjustment as the solution to structural inequalities whilst presenting market participation as the only legitimate foundation for self-worth and social belonging. This ideological transformation demonstrated the conceptual malleability of self-esteem and its capacity to serve fundamentally different political and economic agendas, with therapeutic language increasingly subordinated to economic imperatives that prioritised productivity and self-reliance over personal fulfilment or expanded opportunity. The workshops explicitly promoted self-reliance as the only legitimate foundation for disabled young people's self-esteem, positioning welfare dependency as psychologically corrosive whilst establishing employment as the sole source of authentic confidence and social value. Workshop literature consistently framed provision

[166] 41645/Adm/R/5, 'The Use of Small Occupational Workshops', October 1973.
[167] Ibid.

as alternatives to what organisers called ‘meaningless existence’ dependent on social support, with the 1973 chairman’s report warning that without intervention, disabled youth faced ‘a whole lifetime of uselessness’ and would become ‘a drag on their families and a dead weight on society’.[168]

This economic framing intensified as neoliberal policies gained traction throughout the decade, with workshop materials positioning employment as the only psychologically healthy option whilst arguing that there was ‘a world of difference in terms of independence, self-respect and normality between being able to hold even a simple job’ compared to ‘a lifetime at home or in an occupational workshop’.[169] The equation of self-worth with productive labour became increasingly explicit, with workshops teaching disabled young people that non-employment represented personal failure whilst systematically constraining their access to meaningful work through predetermined channelling towards low-status industrial roles. By 1978, the Warnock Report embodied this philosophy through its advocacy for preparation designed to help disabled young people ‘acquire the self-confidence and skill to manage their personal life as independently as possible’ as well as enabling them ‘to cope with the conditions which they will find in further education or at work’.[170] The emphasis on ‘coping’ over achievement reveals how confidence was conceptualised as adaptation to existing circumstances rather than a capacity to challenge or transform such circumstances for disabled young people.

The transformation from therapeutic intervention to explicit economic training was further reinforced by mounting political concern about welfare costs and dependency that positioned disabled young people’s employment as a fiscal imperative rather than personal right. The Warnock Report explicitly linked disabled youth provision to economic calculation, arguing that resources spent on training would ‘reduce their dependence on the social and health services, and thus the cost to the community of supporting them’, establishing frameworks for evaluating therapeutic success through cost-benefit analysis rather than personal development or expanded opportunity.[171] Workshop organisers increasingly positioned their interventions as economic investments that would prevent long-term welfare dependency,

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[168] 41645/Adm/M/5, Bristol Council for the Disabled, ‘The BCCS Workshop’, c.1967.
[169] 41645/Adm/R/5, ‘The Use of Small Occupational Workshops’, October 1973.
[170] Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Handicapped Young People, *Special Educational Needs*, pp.209-210
[171] Ibid., p.163.

with the 1979 annual report describing participants as potential contributors to national productivity rather than merely individuals deserving support and opportunity.[172]

By 1984, workshop literature had openly rejected 'cushioning' in favour of challenging disabled young people to 'rise above' their difficulties through individual effort, with the annual report contrasting 'springboards' that promoted self-advancement with 'pillows' that merely provided comfort.[173] However, this emphasis on providing 'springboards' obscured the extent to which the workshops simultaneously limited both the confidence and aspirations of participants, ensuring that any advancement remained within carefully predetermined boundaries that reinforced rather than challenged existing hierarchical arrangements. The metaphor of springboards suggested empowerment and upward mobility whilst masking the reality that workshop practices systematically channelled disabled young people towards predetermined occupational roles and constrained their emotional expression within professionally approved limits, demonstrating how neoliberal rhetoric of self-advancement could coexist with fundamentally regulatory practices that maintained social stratification.

This rhetoric explicitly individualised structural disadvantage whilst demanding exceptional effort for minimal social integration, arguing that 'if they are going to rise above these difficulties they will have to put more effort into their lives than other people' without acknowledging the discriminatory barriers that necessitated such exceptional effort.[174] The workshops' focus on producing 'useful working people' whilst carefully delimiting the scope of that usefulness demonstrated how confidence-building had evolved into a technology for managing marginalised populations rather than empowering them, with self-esteem discourse serving to legitimate predetermined occupational trajectories whilst presenting such limitation as personal choice and realistic assessment.[175]

This evolution culminated in explicit rejection of protective approaches that might enable disabled young people to challenge their social positioning or develop aspirations beyond predetermined boundaries. Workshop staff celebrated producing 'greater ability to cope with life' alongside 'more self-esteem and more self-discipline' as valuable achievements even when employment remained unattainable, positioning self-reliance as an end in itself rather

[172] 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report' 1979.
[173] 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report', 1984.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report and Extract from Audited Accounts for 1981', 1981.

than means to expanded participation or social mobility.[176] The workshops' emphasis on 'old-fashioned virtues of self-discipline and effort' whilst positioning progress as entirely dependent on individual determination revealed how neoliberal ideology had transformed therapeutic discourse, with staff explicitly framing success as individual achievement despite systematic interventions designed to produce particular outcomes.[177] By the mid-1980s, confidence-building had become primarily oriented towards producing psychologically adjusted workers capable of accepting limited opportunities without resentment or resistance, demonstrating how self-esteem could function as a mechanism for managing rather than challenging structural inequalities whilst transforming disabled young people into economically viable subjects within carefully maintained hierarchical boundaries.

The Bristol workshops for disabled school leavers revealed how self-esteem could function as a technology of social regulation that simultaneously promised empowerment whilst constraining the material prospects of young people. By defining disabled young people as naturally deficient in appropriate self-feeling, the workshops constructed a rationale for extensive professional intervention that channelled participants towards predetermined occupational roles whilst presenting such limitation as psychological adjustment to the realities of adulthood, rather than personal empowerment and self-development. The workshops' careful approach to confidence calibration – building enough self-regard to enable economic participation whilst preventing aspirations that might exceed perceived potential – exemplified an emerging neoliberal deployment of therapeutic language to manage marginalised populations rather than address the discriminatory barriers they faced. This transformation from compassionate intervention to explicit economic discipline, with self-reliance positioned as the only legitimate foundation for disabled young people's self-worth, represented precisely the kind of damaging individualisation of structural problems that critics of self-esteem discourse have linked to the rise of neoliberalism.

4.4 Conclusion

The three disparate grassroots movements explored above shared a common conviction that cultivating children's self-esteem could drive meaningful social change. The 1960s through to

[176] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report and Extract from Audited Accounts for 1985', 1985.
[177] Bristol Archives, Bristol Council for the Disabled Administrative Records, 41645/Adm/R/1, Annual Reports, BCCS and BCDA, 'Annual Report and Extract from Audited Accounts for 1978', 1978.

the 1980s marked a significant moment of popular enthusiasm for the idea that psychological self-development, particularly among children and young people as symbols of the future, could deliver broader social rewards and transformation. Despite their different contexts and constituencies, these movements revealed how this enthusiasm for self-esteem was reshaping how adults conceptualised childhood, emotional development, and social progress.

Each movement positioned adults as architects (or 'caterers') responsible for systematically building children's confidence to serve adult-defined social goals. The playgroups movement sought to develop children's independence to reduce maternal stress and dependency. Outdoor education programmes aimed to foster collective self-sufficiency as an antidote to capitalist alienation. Workshops for disabled school-leavers carefully calibrated self-confidence to promote economic self-reliance while avoiding unrealistic expectations. In every case, children's emotional development became instrumental to adult visions of social improvement.

This instrumental approach to self-esteem had three critical implications that fundamentally reshaped conceptions of healthy childhood. First, these movements contributed to a new understanding of healthy childhood development in which emotional wellbeing and self-regard became markers of normality. Children who lacked confidence or displayed dependency were increasingly viewed as developmentally deficient, requiring remedial intervention focused on building self-esteem rather than addressing structural inequalities or providing subject-specific support. This vision of normal healthy childhood meant that some children were managed in their self-feeling to a greater degree than others. While discouragement was unthinkable for the young, healthy, boisterous pre-schooler, it was deemed necessary for the 'immature' disabled adolescent leaving school, who needed a realistic outlook in the real world. This pathologised children who failed to embody the new ideal of confident, emotionally secure youth and complements Laura Tisdall's observation of post-war education wherein 'a new image' of healthy, normal childhood emerged, one which 'emphasised extroversion and sociability'.[178]

Second, healthy self-feeling became explicitly tied to children's independence from adult support. Success was regularly measured in terms of reduced dependency – on mothers, on state services, and on traditional support systems. This served adult priorities in terms of relieving maternal burden, reducing welfare costs, and promoting individual self-reliance.

[178] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?,* p.138.

The child's emotional development was thus subordinated to broader social and economic objectives rather than being valued for intrinsic worth. Third, because these programmes needed to demonstrate their effectiveness to adult stakeholders, self-esteem had to be measurable and observable. Confidence was validated through external accomplishments including mastering outdoor survival skills, producing marketable goods, and achieving physical milestones. This attachment to predefined markers of success inherently excluded many children from the category of 'healthy' development. Disabled children, girls who did not conform to physically adventurous ideals, and working-class children with limited access to certain forms of achievement found themselves marginalised by these very programmes designed to promote inclusion.

These limitations should not obscure the compassion that motivated these movements. Each represented a sincere attempt to address children's emotional and social needs in ways that felt neglected by mainstream education. They recognised that children's psychological wellbeing mattered and deserved systematic attention. However, their adult-centric approach ultimately constrained the transformative potential they sought to unleash. When self-esteem became a tool for achieving predetermined adult goals rather than supporting children's own development, it often failed to deliver the empowerment it promised.

This analysis of adult-directed approaches to self-esteem sets the stage for examining a markedly different phenomenon in the next and final chapter of this thesis. Where these grassroots movements attached self-worth to measurable achievements and adult-defined independence, children's own activism in this period developed a more radical understanding of self-esteem rooted in innate human worth rather than external accomplishment. Young activists resisted the idea that their confidence should serve adult agendas or be validated through predetermined, meritocratic or competitive outcomes. Instead, they wielded self-esteem as a tool for challenging ageist, classist, and racist oppression – creating an empowering, politically transformative approach to self-feeling.

5. Youth, Resistance and Self-Feeling in 1970s and 1980s England

In 1967, fifteen-year old Jane Doughty expressed her frustration to a *Daily Mail* reporter:

> It's awful being young these days... You feel everything is geared to you being happy and when you're not you feel as if there's something wrong with you.[1]

Her words captured a peculiar contradiction. Despite a National Opinion Polls survey finding that seven in ten young people thought life was easier for their generation than for previous ones, Jane experienced the cultural emphasis on youth happiness as oppressive.[2] When she failed to met the emotional expectation of contentment, she interpreted this not as a natural emotional fluctuation but as personal failure.

Jane's discomfort reflects personal experience of what Vallgårda and colleagues call an 'emotional frontier' – a sharp contrast between different emotional formations that becomes consciously felt by those subject to emotional demands. By the late 1960s, self-esteem had become central to British educational policy and practice, embedded within streaming systems, remedial programmes, and progressive childrearing philosophies. Policymakers and educators increasingly took for granted that helping children feel good about themselves would not only prevent social problems but also secure a better future for society. Children who lacked self-esteem were seen as requiring remedial intervention. Yet as Jane's testimony illustrates, this cultural emphasis could sometimes expose its own limitations. Young people questioned the emotional demands placed on them, particularly when these seemed to be contradicted by oppressive and discriminatory practices that undermined the self-confidence and happiness they were promised or compelled to exhibit.

This chapter examines how young people and marginalised communities in 1970s and 1980s England negotiated these contradictions and transformed self-esteem into a framework for political struggle. It explores two child-centric social movements that placed self-esteem at the centre of their activism: school student unions and Black supplementary schools. In

[1] Holland, 'Why It's Great to be Young', p.6.
[2] Ibid.

student activist circles, young people exposed educational inequalities by invoking self-esteem as a right that had been systematically denied through authoritarian practices, streaming systems, and creative suppression. Black supplementary schools developed more radical reconstructions, positioning self-esteem not as individual psychology but as collective resistance rooted in cultural heritage and historical consciousness. Both movements recognised that self-esteem, despite its apparent focus on individual feeling, could become a profoundly political framework when wielded by those who understood their psychological distress as symptomatic of structural oppression.

This analysis recognises that children involved in these movements were not simply passive recipients of adult emotional expertise but were agents who actively participated in constructing and transforming the frameworks designed to regulate their psychological development. Rather than accepting hegemonic, mainstream definitions of self-worth as individual adjustment to institutional expectations, student activists and Black communities each developed alternative understandings: collective rather than individualistic, politically conscious rather than therapeutically focused, and grounded in structural critique rather than personal pathology. This is not to say that a majority of children resisted mainstream ideas about self-esteem. In the same article in which Jane Doughty expressed discomfort about the obligation of happiness, one of her peers expressed her desire for 'lashings of self-confidence' – a sentiment shared by 75% of young girls, according to the National Opinion Polls survey.[3] But school student unions and Black supplementary schools reflected a growing recognition that emotional wellbeing and efforts to promote it were themselves unequally distributed.

In both movements, young people resisted the idea that self-esteem derived from observable academic attainment or conformity to institutional norms. Instead, they insisted that self-worth was innate, and particularly in the case of Black supplementary schools, rooted in collective pride and heritage. They framed mainstream educational structures as contradictory, preaching the importance of self-esteem while systematically denying it through competitive pressure, excessive discipline, and systemic racism. Both movements reframed self-esteem as a right and developed psychological critiques of the structural frameworks that withheld it.

[3] Ibid.

Far from representing the selfish 'generation me' that Jean Twenge describes as emerging in the last quarter of the twentieth century, this activism was deeply rooted in emancipatory politics and resulted in tangible change for those involved.[4] School students successfully campaigned to abolish uniforms in some local authorities and contributed to the wider shift towards ending corporal punishment. Black supplementary schools emerged as an informal national network providing supplementary education to address both pedagogical shortcomings and the emotional needs of young Black people in England. These transformations were neither straightforward nor unproblematic. The movements studied here represented only a small minority of children in Britain and even at their small scale differences in opinion were pronounced. As such, both movements experienced significant ambivalence about psychological discourse, recognising its potential for both liberation and co-optation. Their struggles reveal the complex negotiations required to maintain structural critique whilst addressing intimate emotional needs.

Their engagement with self-feeling cannot be dismissed as mere introspection, but as another crucial way in which the personal became political in post-war Britain. The movements demonstrate powerfully how intimate feelings of worth and confidence could serve as tangible, experiential evidence of educational inequality – a visceral marker exposing the gap between progressive rhetoric and institutional reality.

5.1 The Emotional Politics of School Student Protest

This section examines how children helped transform self-esteem into a framework for collective political action during the 1970s. Rather than accepting adult definitions of emotional wellbeing and the routes to self-confidence set out in mainstream educational discourse such as through academic attainment, young people in school student unions reclaimed self-confidence as a contested 'emotional frontier'. They redefined self-confidence as a fundamental right systematically denied by authoritarian educational practices. Through their publications, protests and peer networks, students constructed an alternative emotional vocabulary that positioned self-feeling not as personal deficiency requiring adult intervention, but as evidence of institutional oppression requiring collective resistance. Their writings reveal how children navigated the obligation to 'be happy' whilst simultaneously exposing

[4] Twenge, 'Evidence for Generation Me', p.11.

the inequalities embedded within formal education, creating therapeutic spaces rooted in self-acceptance and political solidarity.

In the years immediately preceding the formation of the first school student union in Britain, the subject of seemingly paradoxical teenage insecurity was already a topic of interest. In November 1967, the *Daily Mail* published the results of a National Opinion Polls survey that offered a revealing glimpse into the emotional lives of British teenagers. Although the respondents recognised their relative material affluence, access to opportunities, and 'easier' lives than their parents' generation, the article found that the teenagers interviewed 'were certainly less extrovert and active than was often imagined', focusing on reports of insecurity among the adolescent respondents.[5] Jane Doughty's aforementioned disillusionment with the obligation she felt to 'be happy' cut sharply against the prevailing assumptions that policies aimed at enhancing young people's material and emotional wellbeing would necessarily translate into a sense of self-confidence. Jane's words demonstrated how the very condition of 'being young' had become shaped by a social imperative to be happy, transforming what was framed as the natural state of childhood into an obligation.[6] For some children, emotional wellbeing had become not a personal experience but a tangible social expectation, leaving little room for personal doubt or insecurity.

This sense of emotional entrapment was compounded for some teenagers by a sense of uncertainty about how to convert self-confidence and ambition into tangible successful outcomes. One nineteen-year-old described the resulting anxiety in terms that would have resonated with many of her peers:

> You know there's something important that you want out of life, but you don't know what it is and you're frightened you'll never get it.[7]

Such reflections complicated any assumption that promoting happiness and self-esteem automatically alleviated distress. Instead, young people suggested that the very pursuit of emotional security could itself become a source of pressure and anxiety. Anticipated routes to self-confidence such as academic success were not necessarily understood as routes to happiness among young people.

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[5] Holland, 'Why it's Great to be Young', p.6.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

The teenagers' testimonies were used in the article to highlight the apparent contradiction between the stereotypical confidence and affluence of young people and their apparent insecurities. They suggested that many young people were keenly aware that their public selves masked more complex inner lives. Eighteen-year-old Sarah articulated this sense of disconnect: 'I'm not really very sure of myself but people think I'm very self-possessed.' She recognised the social dynamics at play, adding, 'they don't like you for it, but it's a risk you've got to take'.[8] Her comment revealed both the performative nature of self-confidence, especially as a young woman, and the social costs of emotional authenticity. Young people had learnt that appearing both uncertain and overconfident invited disapproval.

The expectation to exhibit self-confidence also clashed with how the young people interviewed experienced their interactions and relationships with adults in their lives. Overprotectiveness by adults was linked to depleted self-confidence in young people. In several testimonies, children reflected not only on emotional expectations but on their social positioning as passive recipients of adult care. While progressive ideals emphasised autonomy and self-expression, some children experienced their care as infantilising rather than empowering. Gillian, aged eighteen, offered a reflection on this dynamic: 'My mother does everything for me. It gets so as you're so selfish. You get so much of your own way that when you don't get it you don't like it.'[9] Another young person lamented that she lacked the courage to perform simple adult tasks like returning items to a shop: 'I always get my mother to go instead'.[10] A fifteen-year-old described feeling paralysed in social situations with visceral imagery: 'If I went into a room of strange faces [...] I would just hug the wall and want to die.'[11] These accounts suggested that selfhood could be stunted not by repression or harsh discipline, but by indulgence and overprotection. The language of 'selfishness' in these testimonies pointed to a recognition among young people that an excess of parental comfort and care could become constraining rather than empowering, and that genuine self-confidence required friction and challenge, rather than accommodation.

Although it was not a straightforward concept to negotiate, confidence was still aspirational for the young people interviewed. One eighteen-year-old's aspirations captured the desirability yet elusiveness of confidence in this era. She reported to the *Daily Mail* that she wanted 'masses of clothes and lashings of self-confidence' because confidence 'puts you at

[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.

such a terrific advantage.'[12] The commodification of confidence – listed alongside material desires like clothes – suggested that self-esteem had become something that could be acquired at will. Yet this same recognition of confidence as social capital made its absence all the more painful for those who lacked it. One boy reported that he had been repeatedly been called 'stupid' which had discouraged him from pursuing further education. He told the reporter: 'Well, if they tell you often enough you start believing it, don't you?'[13]

In these testimonies, self-confidence was understood to be both intrinsically advantageous, and somewhat elusive. The article painted a picture of a generation caught between competing imperatives. Young people were expected to be happy, confident and independent whilst avoiding arrogance or permissive behaviour. Progressive emphasis on emotional wellbeing, intended to liberate children from the psychological constraints of traditional education, had created its own constraints. Pressure to maintain positive emotional states, combined with parental overprotection, produced young people who were simultaneously more psychologically aware and more psychologically burdened. Rather than conforming to conservative critiques that dismissed progressive education as permissive indulgence, some young people would forge their own radical responses to these emotional demands, reframing self-esteem as a psychological right denied or violated in mainstream schools, and establishing their own formations of self-esteem.

Against this backdrop of emotional expectation and disillusionment, school student unions emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These organisations represented political organisation by children themselves. Groups including the Schools Action Union (SAU) and the National Union of School Students (NUSS) arose from the frustrations experienced by pupils within an evolving education system – a system that, despite comprehensive reform, progressive rhetoric and egalitarian aspirations, remained hierarchical and traditional in many respects. This provided fertile conditions for pupil-led activism to emerge. As Laura Tisdall explains, children's growing recognition of their social significance 'might have bolstered their sense of self, but might also have left them with a sense of promises left unfulfilled'.[14] Mathew Thomson describes the long 1970s as 'a rather remarkable period for radical thinking and action in relation to the landscape of the child', situating this kind of activism alongside the other 'radical politics' of the decade, including 'sexual and women's liberation

[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, p.246.

movements'.[15] This contradicts Sarah Maza's assertion that children cannot form collective political agendas. Maza argues that unlike other identity groups, children are defined by a 'peculiar relationship to the future', making 'future-directed activity' nonsensical since childhood is 'a vanishing act'.[16] Thus she implies that children have never set agendas not because of structural barriers but because their defining identity is destined to expire. Yet the activities of school student unions in 1970s Britain – organising strikes, publishing manifestos, and demanding reforms to uniforms, discipline, and emotional treatment – fundamentally undermine this claim. Their collective action demonstrates that childhood was not simply a transitional category but a lived experience contested on its own terms, with its own politics, priorities, and emotional claims.

The SAU was the first school student union in England. It was established in 1969 and grew rapidly in its early years, and combining left-wing politics with demands for radical educational reform. It campaigned against school uniforms, corporal punishment, and compulsory religious education, whilst advocating for democratising the education system through student representation and rights. The SAU saw itself not simply as a pressure group but as part of a broader movement for youth liberation. Their demands included 'freedom of speech and assembly' and 'the outlawing of corporal punishment'.[17] By the summer of 1969, the SAU had established a network of 45 'school contacts' – branch leaders in specific Local Education Authorities (LEAs) across England, Scotland and Wales.[18] Like other radical critics of the era, the SAU developed a critique of competitive society, arguing that schools upheld a system where 'competing against others is encouraged and helping others is frowned upon'.[19] Their analysis extended beyond immediate grievances to encompass broader questions about the purpose of education and its role in perpetuating social hierarchies and divisions.

The NUSS was established later, in 1971, and took a more formal and structured approach, aiming to become a representative body for school pupils modelled on the National Union of Students for university students. They explicitly sought to distance themselves from the more overtly political 'Maoist' SAU, as one letter writer to *The Guardian* explained.[20] Although

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[15] Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, p.221.
[16] Sarah Maza, 'The Kids Aren't All Right: Historians and the Problem of Childhood', *The American Historical Review* 125.4 (2020), p.1271, also cited and critiqued in Tisdall, 'State of the field', p.957.
[17] 'School's Action Union', *The Marxist* No. 10 April 1969.
[18] Warwick Modern Records Centre, Schools Action Union, 601/K/1, 'Official School Contacts', 1969.
[19] 'Saturday Review Column / Schools Action Union' *The Times*, June 3 1972.
[20] 'School Revolt: What Next', Letters Page, *The Guardian,* 23 May 1972.

smaller and less radical than the SAU, the NUSS also demanded pupil participation in school governance, greater educational choice, and a system that respected children's rights as individuals. The NUSS 25-point charter was covered in national press, and articulated a comprehensive vision for educational reform. Central to their demands was the principle of respect:

> We must win the right to be respected as individuals. We are denigrated to the point where we can even be caned at will by the headmaster. Caning is a barbaric form of punishment which should not be allowed to be inflicted by one individual on another.[21]

This framing of corporal punishment as a violation of human dignity rather than merely an outdated disciplinary practice revealed that self-feeling formed part of the power dynamics that animated the movement.

The SAU adopted a dynamic and confrontational style of activism that reflected their radical critique of British schooling. Branches organised mass protests, distributed pamphlets, occupied schools, and issued bold demands for democratic participation and curricular reform. In May 1972, the SAU staged a National School Strike, encouraging pupils across the country to walk out in protest against corporal punishment and authoritarianism in schools. The strike represented a coordinated national action that demonstrated the organisational capacity of the movement and the widespread nature of student grievances.[22] The NUSS, meanwhile, pursued a somewhat different strategy, circulating bulletins and handbooks, holding regional meetings, and coordinating national action with the aim of building solidarity among school students. Their approach emphasised building institutional structures that could sustain long-term advocacy rather than relying solely on dramatic protests. Both organisations engaged actively with public discourse and members gave interviews to the press, participated in political education work, and formed alliances with sympathetic adult organisations including Agitprop and the Gay Liberation Front.[23] Despite limited material resources and a hostile media environment, these student groups managed to carve out a

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[21] '"Abolish Heads" Call in 25-Point Charter*', Times Educational Supplement,* 26 May 1972.
[22] 'Today in London's Educational History, 1972: a Schools Action Union Strike and Demonstration', *Past Tense* <https://pasttense.co.uk/2020/05/17/today-in-londons-educational-history-1972-a-schools-action-union-strike-and-demonstration/> [accessed 23 March 2023].
[23] Ibid.

disruptive presence in the educational landscape, advancing a distinctive vision of schooling grounded in rights, autonomy, and social justice.

The intellectual framework that guided the unions and other pupils sympathetic to their messages was significantly shaped by texts that circulated among young activists. Chief among these was the *Little Red School Book*, originally published in Danish in 1969 and first advertised in Britain in 1971 after being rewritten for the British context. Marketed as 'a practical education manual for schoolchildren from 12', the book provided both practical advice and ideological ammunition for student activists.[24] Although ultimately banned under the Obscene Publications Act, it was distributed secretly between schoolchildren, with excerpts reprinted and circulated in pupil newsletters.[25] The book's central message resonated powerfully with student activists. Its assertion that adults were merely 'paper tigers' who 'can never control you completely' encouraged students to believe 'in [their] own capabilities' rather than accepting institutional authority as absolute.[26] This psychological reframing became foundational to student demands for agency within educational institutions, repositioning children from passive recipients of adult control to active agents capable of challenging institutional power. The *Little Red School Book* provided not just critique but practical strategies for resistance, offering advice on everything from dealing with authoritarian teachers to understanding one's rights within the education system.

School student unions placed children's self-concept and psychological wellbeing at the centre of their demands for reform. Both the SAU and the NUSS articulated how traditional schooling systematically undermined children's sense of self-worth, developing analyses that were both informed and amplified by their engagement with radical educational literature. They argued that conformity and authoritarian teaching suppressed pupil dignity and authentic personhood, and represented a systematic denial of school pupils' feelings of personal worth. Self-esteem was reframed by the unions as a right that was denied to them through exclusionary and oppressive aspects of schooling. These aspects of schooling – authority, punishment, uniform, and expression – became key targets for the unions' critiques.

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[24] Owen Emmerson, 'Childhood and the Emotion of Corporal Punishment in Britain: 1938-1986' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 2019), pp.253-4.
[25] Hull History Centre, Liberty Archive, U DCL/321/4, *Orbit: A Newspaper by the Boys about their School*, Issue No.3, (Tulse Hill School, London: 8 February 1972).
[26] Søren Hansen and Jesper Jensen, *The Little Red School Book*, trans. by Berit Moore (London: Handyside, 1970), no page information.

Student activists linked their institutional powerlessness in schools directly to notions of damaged self-concept, using these connections to justify demands for democratic participation in school governance. The Liverpool School Action Committee articulated this relationship explicitly when they argued in the pages of student-authored SAU publication *Vanguard* in 1969 that 'the whole educational system is geared to making us think we are second-rate' because 'decisions are made for us, not by us'.[27] Here, powerlessness was understood partially in terms of its impact of pupil self-feeling. It reflected a framework of self-concept that was not simply an individual psychological trait but a political resource – a right – systematically denied to students through exclusion from decision-making processes. By framing low self-worth as a product of institutional structures rather than individual deficiency, student activists created a new justification for democratic reform in their schools.

The NUSS extended this analysis by positioning their union as a vehicle for restoring human dignity that was lost through schooling. As Nigel Wright explained in the socialist teachers' journal *Rank and File*, the NUSS sought to create conditions where 'school students will be treated as human beings and w[ould] no longer accept a second-rate education, doled out in a humiliating and degrading atmosphere of authoritarianism'.[28] The emphasis on being 'treated as humans' suggested a struggle not only for rights but for emotional recognition. Thus the NUSS strategically linked educational quality to psychological treatment, suggesting that authentic learning was impossible without respect for students' fundamental humanity and self-concept as citizens with rights. Similarly, the SAU's early demands, articulated by the South-West London Schools Action Group in 1969, called for 'a harmonious educational environment, based on mutual respect and cooperation, in which the individual can freely develop in his own individual way'.[29] This directly connected democratic participation to individual psychological development and suggested that authentic self-development required genuine agency within educational institutions.

The *Little Red School Book* reinforced these student analyses by providing psychological explanations for teacher authoritarianism couched in language of self-feeling. The authors argued that 'bad and authoritarian teachers are tied up in knots or afraid of something or other' and that their behaviour stemmed from 'a lack of belief in themselves'. The authors

[27] Warwick Modern Records Centre, Schools Action Union, 601/K/3, 'Vanguard' Publication, No.3, 1st February 1969'.
[28] Nigel Wright, 'Schools Unions', *Rank and File: Journal of Socialist Teachers* 1971.
[29] Warwick Modern Records Centre, Schools Action Union, 601/K/5, 'South-West London Schools Action Group', 1969.

observed that such teachers were ‘insecure and have to rely on their authority all the time’.[30] This reframing served multiple functions for student activists. It demystified teacher authority by revealing its psychological origins, encouraged empathy rather than fear, and positioned students as psychologically healthier than their oppressors. By understanding teacher authoritarianism as a symptom of adult insecurity rather than legitimate authority, students could justify resistance as emotionally important for both themselves and their teachers.

Corporal punishment was the aspect of teacher authority that received most attention from the unions. Protests against the use of physical punishment were among the most successful and widespread for the unions, and received significant national media attention. The Heaton School walkout in Newcastle in 1976, reported in the *Daily Mail* as a response to threats of a ‘super strap’ being introduced as the headteacher doubled down on the commitment to using corporal punishment, demonstrated how students were willing to take collective action against physical punishment.[31]

Union discourse about opposition to physical punishment strategically emphasised psychological rather than physical harm, using scientific discourse about mental health to challenge practices that traditional authority figures justified as character-building. The Nottingham School Students Union marshalled psychoanalytical ideas to argue that corporal punishment caused ‘depression, inferiority complexes, and even insanity’, positioning their opposition within psychological rather than solely moral frameworks.[32] Their publication featured a particularly powerful case study of ‘an eight-year-old boy who was caned every day’ who became so psychologically damaged that ‘he could only scream "fuck off!" when approached by anyone’. The child’s recovery only began ‘under the guidance of the non-caning headteacher who treated this boy as a human being for the first time in his life’.[33] This narrative served as powerful evidence that institutional violence created rather than corrected behavioural problems, and demonstrated the idea that respect for human dignity was therapeutically superior to punishment.

This psychological perspective allowed student activists to challenge corporal punishment through a complex framework whereby psychology merged with understandings of hierarchical and unequal power relations between students and teachers. The radical student

[30] Hansen and Jensen, *The Little Red School Book*, no page information.
[31] ‘Classroom Thugs Will Face “Super Strap” *Daily Mail*, Friday Aug 13 1976, p.13.
[32] Hull History Centre, Liberty Archive, U DCL/321/4, Magazine of the Nottingham School Student Union (no date).
[33] Ibid.

magazine *Rebel* advanced this notion by characterising corporal punishment as achieving 'the psychological and ideological domination of school students' through 'public humiliation and intimidation'.[34] Student activists consistently linked corporal punishment to broader questions of human dignity and self-respect. NUSS president Mary Attenborough declared in the *Times Educational Supplement* that 'we are denigrated to the point where we can even be caned at will by the headmaster'.[35] Thus, corporal punishment's true function was understood to maintain hierarchical power relations by systematically damaging students' self-concept and capacity for resistance.

School student unions also critiqued school practices that suppressed individuality and creative expression. Displays of individual or authentic personhood were framed as resistance in the authoritarian school, and as prerequisites for self-confidence. In particular, unions focused on uniforms and clothing regulations. In the pages of *Vanguard* in 1969, the SAU characterised uniforms as creating 'the monotonous line of like-looking, like-indoctrinated pupils [who] resemble nothing more than the results of a mass production education system'.[36] Uniform requirements were understood fundamentally as ways of creating compliant workers, making resistance to dress codes a form of psychological self-defence. Publications like *Vanguard* consistently argued that uniform policies revealed institutional priorities that valued conformity over individual expression. One author observed that 'a little liberty of dress might encourage a little liberty of thought – though to many heads this will be a reason for keeping them' – explicitly connecting clothing restrictions to psychological control, suggesting that schools understood the psychological significance of self-expression and deliberately suppressed it.[37]

The importance of self-expression also resonated with children who sought to distance themselves from the movement. Children opposed to the actions of what they perceived to be militant and disruptive unions also employed these ideas about expression and individuality to argue against comprehensive reform in education. One student, writing under the headline 'Don't Make my School a Factory' in the *Daily Mail* in June 1973, described large comprehensive schools as institutions where 'there is no relationship between teacher and

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[34] Warwick Modern Records Centre, Schools Action Union, 601/K/2, South London SAU, 'Rebel' Magazine 1.1 25, October 1969.
[35] '"Abolish Heads"', *Times Educational Supplement,* 26 May 1972.
[36] Warwick Modern Records Centre, Schools Action Union, 601/K/3, 'Vanguard' Publication, No.1, 1 January 1969.
[37] 601/K/2, South London SAU, 'Rebel' Magazine, 1969.

pupil and a complete loss in individuality', likening them unfavourably to 'schools of 3,000' seen abroad, which were 'worse than a factory'.[38] This paradoxically aligned the critical child with the radical student voices that framed schooling as a process of mechanical social reproduction: 'The school is a factory and has the task of turning out education (indoctrinated) people to fit into society's well-defined pigeon holes'.[39] This mechanistic view of education was bound up with critiques of conformity and suppression, as students argued that schools taught 'people not to question' and that real education should instead involve 'a process of discovering for oneself', rather than passive reception.[40] Through the factory metaphor, children both inside and outside the unions expressed a loss of agency and self-concept within a system designed to mould rather than nurture.

Opposition to school uniforms became a powerful lens through which student activists critiqued the class-based norms embedded within the education system. The SAU *Rebel* magazine condemned 'slavish conformity to outmoded middle class styles of dress', positioning uniform requirements as class-based psychological violence that forced working-class students to adopt alien identities.[41] *Vanguard* made similar arguments about expectations in schools, observing that 'children from working-class homes usually have more difficulty in adjusting to the typically middle-class demands made of them'.[42] The *Little Red School Book* built on these observations, noting a more systemic issue in schools whereby 'most teachers expect pupils with working-class accents or immigrant backgrounds to learn less, and [...] therefore teach them less', urging pupils not to 'let a teacher make assumptions about you or your abilities'.[43] Class was therefore integrated into the unions' framework of educational inequality, where class-based expectations mapped onto teaching practices which could have ramifications for pupil self-worth. In this context, resistance to uniforms was not merely about personal expression but resisting the symbolic erasure of class difference and the homogenising function of education that treated middle-class identity as both neutral and aspirational.

The topic of uniforms was also discussed in local school newspapers where debates about key union issues became vehicles for broader discussions about authentic identity development.

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[38] 'Don't Make My School a Factory' (Letters), *Daily Mail*, June 20 1973.
[39] Warwick Modern Records Centre, Schools Action Union, 601/K/3, 'Vanguard' Publication, No.5, 24th February 1969.
[40] Ibid.
[41] 601/K/2, South London SAU, 'Rebel' Magazine, 1969.
[42] 601/K/3, 'Vanguard' No.3, 1969.
[43] Hansen and Jensen, *The Little Red School Book*, no page information.

The Tulse Hill School publication *Orbit* gave extensive coverage to uniform policies in its February 1972 issue, including student arguments that uniforms failed to serve as 'universal levellers' because they 'didn't disguise differences in parental income'.[44] Students used clothing debates to challenge institutional claims about equality and fairness. The magazines also celebrated schools, such as Holland Park Comprehensive, which had implemented optional uniform policies, presenting these as models for more respectful treatment of student autonomy.[45]

The issue of uniform also became pervasive in public discourse. In 1972, *The Times* featured extensive correspondence on the issue, sparking debate across generations. One twelve-year-old school student wrote to protest the SAU's campaign to abolish uniforms, but acknowledged that 'some would be badly hurt by the sneering of unkind children who have well-off parents that can afford to buy their children expensive clothes'. [46] Like the debate on corporal punishment, students from inside and outside of the movement acknowledged that uniform conformity could have a detrimental impact on the child's school experience and their psychological wellbeing. Others in the debate wrote in unequivocal support for the SAU stance, arguing that uniforms constituted an 'outward sign of [...] regimentation and denial of individuality'.[47]

Resistance to enforced conformity in schools was not only a rejection of arbitrary rules, but a profound assertion of emotional autonomy and individual rights. Students linked institutional demands for uniformity to a sense of emotional harm and psychological suppression. *Butt* magazine, produced by students at Wandsworth School, published complaints about being 'treated as cabbage' rather than as individuals, underscoring how conformity policies stripped students of agency and reduced them to undifferentiated subjects.[48] These ideas reflected a deeper anxiety about depersonalisation and the denial of selfhood in the education system. Protests against hair length regulations further revealed how students understood these rules not as practical measures, but as symbolic mechanisms of control. As one student put it, rules about appearance served to 'put you all in the same category' linking school rules to the suppression of visible, bodily markers of individuality.[49]

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[44] U DCL/321/4, *Orbit* No.3, 1972.
[45] Wandsworth School, *Butt Magazine,* (March 1972).
[46] Jane Turner, 'School Uniforms', *The Times,* 19 May 1972.
[47] 'Truants or Protestors?' *The Times*, May 20 1972.
[48] Wandsworth School, *Butt Magazine,* (March 1972).
[49] National Council for Civil Liberties, 'Adviser', *Children's Rights,* No.1, p.23.

Anti-uniform protests erupted across the country throughout the 1970s. In Dagenham, the *Daily Mail* reported that over 300 pupils 'boycotted lessons yesterday and squatted outside the school gates with placards and banners' in protest of a compulsory uniform policy in September 1971.[50] In Barnsley, 100 pupils were reported to have 'chanted slogans and refused to return to classes' and 'at one stage they tried to turn over a van belonging to a television crew' during protests in March 1975. One particularly creative protest in East Barnet saw female students arrive to school in trousers and male students in skirts, to make a point about sexist discrimination via uniform requirements.[51] In some jurisdictions, student campaigning on uniform reportedly prompted councils to incorporate legislation to ban compulsory uniform in schools, as had happened in Sheffield where local pupils reported that when 700 pupils went on strike to protest uniforms 'the Local Authorities have said they don't have to wear it anymore'.[52] Indeed, by the late 1970s the Council were ordered by the Sheffield Labour Party 'to phase out uniform'.[53]

Progressive educators often echoed children's own critiques of school uniforms, arguing that enforced dress codes suppressed individuality and self-expression. Gene Adams, an ILEA art teacher, noted that in a survey of 13- to 14-year-olds, the majority opposed uniforms, calling them 'impractical and [having] nothing to do with education'. She noted in particular that children resisted the identity that uniform imposed, quoting one child: "School uniform is smart – but I don't like being smart", and girls who protested not being permitted to wear trousers in winter 'because it made them look like boys!'.[54] Adams herself asserted that uniforms were 'out of place in modern education which places emphasis on the development of the individual, not his subjugation to mass conformity,' noting too their role in enabling 'petty meanness in bad schools'.[55] Similarly, an article in the journal *Children's Rights* titled 'The Self-Clad Child' championed children's agency in dress from infancy, challenging the assumption that young people desire conformity to avoid ridicule. While noting gendered differences in clothing preferences, the article insisted that children's clothes should reflect their personal expression and functional needs.[56] For these progressive voices, uniform was

[50] 'No Uniform, Say Demo Girls' *Daily Mail*, Saturday 18 September 1971.
[51] National Union of School Students, *BLOT: NUSS Paper*, No.2 (no date).
[52] Labour History Archive, NUSS and Schools Action Union, CP/CENT/YOUTH/04/08, NUSS, NUSS Your Union' Flyer, 1975.
[53] Labour History Archive, NUSS and Schools Action Union, CP/CENT/YOUTH/04/08, NUSS, 'BLOT: Paper by NUSS', 1979.
[54] Hull History Centre, Liberty Archive, U DCL/321/4, Gene Adams, Notes About the Rights of Children in Schools (no date).
[55] Ibid.
[56] National Council for Civil Liberties, *Children's Rights*, No.3, 1971.

not a matter of discipline but of identity, and its enforcement a barrier to the emotional and creative development of the child.

Pupil activists also identified academic competition and streaming as systematic mechanisms for creating hierarchies of self-worth that served broader social functions rather than educational ones. One school student's observation, published in the NUSS magazine *BLOT*, that 'our school is very competitive' and that 'the only ones that don't bunk off are academic geniuses or people that have learnt how to fit in' revealed how competitive environments created psychological casualties rather than motivating all students to succeed.[57] For this student, truancy was not individual rebellion but a rational response to an environment that measured worth through narrow academic metrics. In such a climate, psychological harm was not an unfortunate side-effect but a structural outcome.

The Liverpool Schools Action Committee developed this critique further in *Vanguard*, arguing that 'the education system as a whole is geared to the examination process, which just grades us for the needs of industry'.[58] Here, students argued that the school system served less to nurture intellectual curiosity than to produce a docile, stratified workforce. Streaming and exams functioned as tools of economic selection, not personal development. This argument was echoed in The *Little Red School Book*, which framed streaming as 'a form of rationing' used to make up for lack of funding by schools as 'the most efficient way of using scarce teachers' with the byproduct of 'social discrimination'.[59] The economic lens was used to argue that resource constraints were used as justifications for practices that damaged children's self-concepts. Meanwhile, the NUSS called for comprehensive education in terms grounded in emotional and psychological rhetoric. Their flyer titled 'Fully comprehensive – now!' critiqued streaming and exams as 'artificial barriers' that served to 'split up people into groups and cause a feeling of jealousy and resentment'.[60] Comprehensive reform was framed not simply as a political demand, but an imperative rooted in concern for the emotional wellbeing of students.

The *Little Red School Book* provided direct psychological support and advice for students experiencing these systems. It spoke directly to children placed in lower streams, urging them

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[57] Labour History Archive, NUSS and Schools Action Union, CP/CENT/YOUTH/04/08, NUSS, 'BLOT: Paper by NUSS', 1978.
[58] 601/K/3, 'Vanguard' Publication, No.3, 1st February 1969.
[59] Hansen and Jensen, *The Little Red School Book*, no page information.
[60] Labour History Archive, NUSS and Schools Action Union, CP/CENT/YOUTH/04/08, NUSS, 'Fully Comprehensive - Now!' Flyer, (no date).

not to 'accept the ideas behind streaming yourselves', and reminding them that 'people's abilities and characters aren't shown by what stream they're in'.[61] By encouraging students to question the legitimacy of academic ranking, the book offered both psychological relief and a toolkit for ideological defiance. Its broader message, that 'marks themselves mean nothing', challenged the dominant assumption that assessment equated to value, and warned students against internalising externally imposed judgments. 'Never mind how other people do', it advised, 'try to get the best of each subject for yourself'. [62]

Progressive educators also spoke about the impact of competitive examinations, but tended to echo postwar concerns about social comparison in the event of failure. They did not directly echo the student union concern with individuality and discrimination. A long-standing advocate for child-centred education, James Hemming repeatedly warned of the psychological toll inflicted by competitive assessment regimes. In his contribution to a so-called 'Red Paper' response to the conservative Black Papers, published by Edinburgh University students, he cautioned that forcing the so-called 'non-academic child' to endure repeated failure would inevitably cause them to 'feel inferior as a person'. The consequence, he warned, would not be resilience but withdrawal, 'a whirlwind of apathy, irresponsibly and resentment'.[63]

The unions were generally more concerned with protecting individuality and dignified personhood than protecting themselves from the negative experience of failure. This is explained in part by the connection drawn between concern about conformity in the 1970s and wider anxieties about authoritarianism and the rise of the far right. Among schoolchildren, the association between uniformity and fascism was explicit, particularly within the School Kids Against the Nazis (SKAN) movement. Cathy from Derby, writing to SKAN magazine, rejected the National Front not only for its violence but for its vision of social regimentation:

> I wouldn't like to see everyone in uniform or going into the army upon leaving school. I like people who like to be individuals, in clothes and mind. If everyone

[61] Hansen and Jensen, *The Little Red School Book*, no page information.
[62] Ibid.
[63] 'Attack by Students', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 13th January 1970.

> followed the NF Nazis we would be like cabbages, doing and thinking the same as everyone else.[64]

Her comment linked political authoritarianism directly to a fear of social homogenisation, suggesting that the loss of individual expression was a hallmark of creeping fascism. Another contributor noted that even subcultures like skinheads were targeted by the National Front because 'Skinheads think for themselves and hate authority', reinforcing the association between non-conformity and resistance.[65]

These fears were not limited to youth culture. In academic responses to education reform, such as R.S. Peters' 1969 critique of the Plowden Report, conformity was likewise viewed as antithetical to democracy. Peters reminded readers that educational theorists like Gesell, Nunn, and Dewey had explicitly opposed fascism by promoting ideals of growth and self-actualisation, which they understood as safeguards of individuality in democratic societies. As Peters put it, the psychological theories of Rogers and Maslow offered 'a plea for the individual in a changed social setting', pushing back against what he described as '"other-directed" types of society'. [66] In this context, education that cultivated independent thought and emotional selfhood was seen not merely as progressive, but as politically urgent in the face of growing far-right ideologies.

The *Little Red School Book* reinforced these perspectives by encouraging children to 'work out your own system of values by which to judge both yourself and your schoolmates' and to 'reject the standards and values which grown-ups try to force on you'.[67] The book's reminder that 'you are a person in your own right' and 'accountable only to yourself for your own actions' provided a foundation for resistance based on psychological autonomy rather than mere rebellion.[68] It tied ideas about individual interest and expression directly to the learning process, obscured in schools by what it identified as arbitrary rules and distinctions. 'To learn anything useful', it argued, 'it's important that you should want to; [...] that you get a chance to say something yourself; that you are allowed to work on the subject in your own way'.[69] If these conditions were not met, authors encouraged children to consider whether it was the

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[64] Labour History Archive, School Kids Against the Nazis (SKAN), CP/CENT/YOUTH/05/01, 'SKAN No.6', (no date).
[65] Labour History Archive, School Kids Against the Nazis (SKAN), CP/CENT/YOUTH/05/01, 'SKAN No.5', (no date).
[66] Peters, 'A Recognisable Philosophy', p.7.
[67] Hansen and Jensen, *The Little Red School Book*, no page information.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.

teacher who was not 'very good at teaching' and encouraged them to support their teacher to become better, noting that teachers may themselves be insecure, particularly when experimenting with progressive pedagogy.[70]

Finally, student unions also positioned authentic voice and self-expression as fundamental psychological needs that educational institutions systematically denied, using this analysis to justify demands for press freedom, democratic participation, and respect for student perspectives. In January 1969, the SAU held a conference in London which decided that the union's first action as a national body – a demonstration set for February that year – 'should demand freedom of expression in schools', including the removal of censorship of student magazines.[71] *Orbit* magazine featured a letter from a pupil from another school who school wrote to express admiration for the freedom with which *Orbit* was published, noting that in their school they were only permitted to write 'in academic form'.[72] The paper placed great emphasis on pupil opinion, featuring on its back page the results of a 'do you like school meals?' survey and an image of pupil Mohammed Khan interviewing boys for the survey, demonstrating how student journalism could centre young voices.[73]

Students defended an array of forms of expression as psychologically essential. Contributors to *BLOT* argued that graffiti was 'an important medium for self-expression; a natural and individual medium' that provided particular benefits for 'an inhibited person' through 'anonymous communication'.[74] The appeal lay in its anonymity and spontaneity; a means of release in an environment where students were often denied other outlets. Institutional resistance to such forms of expression, the magazine argued, was itself harmful, a refusal to acknowledge the psychological needs of young people.[75]

The *Stepney Words* strike at Sir John Cass and Redcoat School in May 1971, documented by radical educationalist Chris Searle, offers a particularly vivid example of how self-expression became a vehicle for challenging institutional authority and resisting hierarchical structures. The strike began when students' creative writing was censored, prompting them to walk out in defence of their right to publish poetry that reflected their own experiences and emotions. Searle described the protest as a 'statement of needs', in which children used poetry to

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[70] Ibid.
[71] Warwick Modern Records Centre, Schools Action Union, 601/K/3, 'Vanguard' Publication, No.2, 15th January 1969.
[72] U DCL/321/4, *Orbit* Issue No.3, 1972.
[73] Ibid.
[74] CP/CENT/YOUTH/04/08, NUSS, 'BLOT: Paper by NUSS', 1978.
[75] Ibid.

declare not only their material circumstances, but also their emotional truths: 'This is what we have got, and this is what we lack. Now this is what we need.'[76]

At the heart of this action was an insistence that emotional self-expression was inseparable from personal and political autonomy. One child's poem asserted:

> *I have my own identity*
> *I have my own ideas*
> *With what should be done to this world.*[77]

The strike was more than a defence of creative freedom and articulated a fundamental challenge to the hierarchical norms of the education system, which routinely denied students the right to define themselves. Through poetry, students claimed authority over their own lives and experiences, rejecting the idea that knowledge and value resided solely with teachers, governors, or exam boards.

At the centre of school student activism in the 1970s were notions of human dignity and authentic personhood that the unions argued were denied in schools. Lack of democratic participation, subjection to corporal punishment, and absence of opportunities for creative expressions of individuality were all positioned as counterproductive to fostering genuine selfhood and therefore self-worth in education. Democracy in schools, self-expression, and creativity were all posited as ways to reclaim the right to self-worth of children in schools. Through their own publications, pupils involved in unions set out to establish an outlet from which self-worth could be reclaimed.

BLOT magazine's declaration that students had 'no voice' so 'no-one will hear you complain; you haven't got a chance to change a thing' – because adults assumed they were 'too young to hear speak or think' – made clear the idea that voicelessness functioned as a form of psychological oppression that damaged students' sense of agency and self-worth.[78] Their assertion that 'we know what we think and we've got a lot to say, but nowhere to say it and no one to listen', challenged age-based assumptions about cognitive capacity and an underlying confidence while highlighting the psychological impact of systematic silencing.[79] In response, *BLOT* positioned itself as a therapeutic outlet, explicitly dedicated to printing

[76] National Council for Civil Liberties, *Children's Rights*, No.3, 1971.
[77] Ibid.
[78] CP/CENT/YOUTH/04/08, NUSS, 'BLOT: Paper by NUSS', 1978.
[79] Ibid.

'what we think – what school kids think – and what you think,' and 'not scared of letting people express what they feel'.[80] This framing cast the magazine not simply as a forum for ideas, but as a space of emotional care.

Student publications like *BLOT* were spaces in which young people could articulate their own understandings of emotional wellbeing, dignity, and self-worth. These were not discourses handed down from experts, but ones developed through shared experience. In place of adult anxieties about motivation or discipline, school students emphasised recognition, solidarity, and self-acceptance. Union publications provided advice columns, personal testimonies, poetry, humour, and practical strategies for coping with stigma, isolation, or failure. These did not seek to diagnose 'deficiency', but to validate feeling and encourage mutual support. In doing so, they disrupted the dominant assumption that confidence was something to be granted by adults or earned through competition. Instead, they framed it as something that could be cultivated through collective affirmation, emotional honesty, and the rejection of institutional hierarchies that defined worth in narrow academic or behavioural terms. This peer-driven emotional discourse positioned self-esteem not as a private trait to be developed in isolation, but as a shared resource, nurtured through voice, expression, and connection.

BLOT was a key site for this reconceptualisation. The magazine positioned itself as 'written by school kids for them so it's written in the language we use', creating a deliberate contrast with adult-mediated discussions of youth psychology.[81] Funded by a £1,500 grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, *BLOT* was conceived not as an internal union newsletter but as a broader platform for school students, combining political content with articles on everyday issues like music, hobbies, and contraception. A London-based editorial board was appointed to manage production, a practical decision made to avoid travel costs. Though modest in scale, *BLOT* represented an ambitious effort to centre student voices in print.[82]

The magazine's editorial approach was groundbreaking in its directness. While the first issue was praised in *The Times* for its professional layout and strong editorial voice, it quickly attracted controversy for its candid discussion of taboo subjects like masturbation and contraception. *The Mirror* ran with the headline 'Sex Shock Mag Hits Schools', while internal response within NUSS was equally divided, particularly among Scottish and sixth-

[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Labour History Archive, NUSS and Schools Action Union, CP/CENT/YOUTH/04/08, NUSS, 'NUSS National Conference 1979 NC Report on BLOT', 1979;

form members who felt underrepresented.[83] Despite these challenges, *BLOT* created what its editors described as a space to 'tell it how it is and change it':

> This paper is about school, about being taught, about being young. […] The school students who've written this paper have written about their own experiences – their own fears and hopes – the aim of the mag is to tell it how it is and change it.[84]

In framing the magazine around personal testimony and peer-to-peer communication, *BLOT* offered an alternative to adult narratives about youth. Rather than being spoken for, students used the platform to reflect on their own identities, frustrations, and aspirations, treating 'being young' not as a transitional stage to be managed, but as a subject worthy of expression and political attention in its own right.

This commitment to authentic expression and emotional honesty was most clearly developed in the form of practical, peer-oriented therapeutic advice that that addressed the everyday emotional challenges students faced, but which were often ignored or pathologised by adults. *BLOT*'s coverage of puberty provides a telling example of this approach. Rather than offering clinical explanations or moral instruction, the magazine foregrounded reassurance and self-acceptance: 'The important thing to remember is that it's different for everybody – everyone develops at different rates,' one article explained, 'and there's nothing to worry about if you're 16 and don't need to shave or haven't yet had a period'.[85] In doing so, it resisted the dominant culture of normalisation that measured young people against rigid developmental benchmarks and reinforced feelings of inadequacy or shame. The emphasis on individual difference reframed variation not as a problem to be solved but as a fact of life to be understood and embraced. This approach implicitly challenged the standardising logic of schooling, with its tendency to sort, stream, and evaluate young people according to narrow academic and behavioural criteria. Instead, *BLOT* offered an alternative framework of worth based on emotional validity and personal experience.

The *Little Red School Book* was frequently excerpted in *BLOT* and was invoked to reinforce its message of self-acceptance, while encouraging resistance to conformity pressures:

> Don't feel ashamed or guilty about doing things you really want to do and think are right just because your parents or teachers might disapprove. A lot of these things will

[83] CP/CENT/YOUTH/04/08, NUSS, 'NUSS National Conference 1979 NC Report on BLOT', 1979.
[84] CP/CENT/YOUTH/04/08, NUSS, 'BLOT: Paper by NUSS', 1978.
[85] National Union of School Students, *Blot: NUSS Paper* No.2 (no date).

> be more important to you later in life than the things that are "approved of" […] Be yourself.[86]

Such advice represented a fundamental challenge to institutional expectations, suggesting that authentic selfhood might require deliberate resistance to adult authority rather than compliance with it. The magazine's approach to sensitive topics like masturbation further illustrated their commitment to normalising individual difference while providing peer support.[87] Rather than avoiding controversial subjects, *BLOT* addressed them directly while emphasising the range of normal experience, fostering solidarity through emotional variance and validating anxiety and ambivalence rather than prescribing self-assurance.

Student publications also developed critiques of the commercial forces that shaped teenage self-perception, particularly the girls' magazines that dominated youth culture. *BLOT*'s third issue included a detailed analysis of publications like *Jackie*, arguing that they exploited teenage insecurities for profit while promoting damaging ideals of femininity: 'They try to make out that the only things girls should be interested in is the question of Boys', the article observed.[88] The critique extended beyond content to question the economic motives behind such publications:

> The people who write the magazines aren't kidded by them, anyway. All they want to do is sell the things, and make as much money as possible at it; they make a living off teenage hangups. But so what if you don't look and behave exactly like the people who write girls' magazines think you should? Does it really matter if boys don't mob you the minute you walk into the room, almost falling off your stilettos, with a wonderful smile on your face?[89]

This analysis revealed the union's desire to connect personal insecurities to broader structural forces. By questioning these expectations directly these critiques were couched not only in political outrage but also in emotional reflection, calling attention to the ways these scripts exacerbated self-doubt and constrained self-expression. Girls' magazines were seen not as harmless entertainment but as emotionally exploitative, reinforcing unattainable ideals under

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[86] Hansen and Jensen, *The Little Red School Book*, no page information.
[87] CP/CENT/YOUTH/04/08, NUSS, 'BLOT: Paper by NUSS', 1978.
[88] CP/CENT/YOUTH/04/08, NUSS, 'BLOT Issue 3: Paper by NUSS', 1979.
[89] Ibid.

the guise of support. In exposing these elements of popular culture, student writers created space for their peers to develop self-acceptance independent of commercial pressures.

Despite their energetic campaigns and bold rhetoric, the school student movement ultimately struggled to sustain momentum. The SAU 'fizzled out' by 1974, a result of both internal and external pressures.[90] Internally, the group faced organisational instability, with high turnover among young activists who aged out of school and difficulties maintaining a coherent structure across dispersed local branches. The challenge of organising children across the country, who often had limited time to commit to the movement before leaving school, proved insurmountable for maintaining long-term institutional stability. Moreover, the unions represented only a minority of children. According to a National Opinion Polls survey 90 per cent of pupils were happy with the way their favourite subject was taught, and only 17 per cent expressed a desire to attend a different kind of school.[91] Externally, the political climate became increasingly hostile, with growing backlash against radical educational reform and mounting surveillance of youth activism. As Thomson has observed, radical activism centred on children was often obscured by its 'marginal and unrealistic nature'.[92] The NUSS continued into the late 1970s but never achieved the same visibility or influence the SAU had at its peak.[93] By the early 1980s, as conservatism tightened its grip on British education policy under Margaret Thatcher, the radical vision of these student unions faded.

Their significance lay perhaps less in concrete changes to the education system, and more in their powerful emotional formation of self-worth, which was fundamentally different to adult conceptualisations of childhood self-feeling. Where ideas from mainstream and even grassroots educational discourse linked self-esteem to notions of success and failure, the SAU and the NUSS developed a vision of self-worth that was predicated on the importance of realising innate self-worth through self-expression and human dignity. Their approach was two-fold. On one hand, it required the dismantling of oppressive structures which obscured agency and individuality. On the other, a more therapeutic aspect to the unions' activities involved a message of self-acceptance. It was neither apolitical nor individualised, but constantly situated within broader ideas about the relationship between young people and society. The next section explores how the same ideas were implemented by activists in the

[90] Owen Emmerson, 'No to the Cane', *Jacobin* <https://jacobin.com/2017/10/scotland-corporal-punishment-britain-schools-action-union> [accessed 26 June 2023].
[91] Holland, 'Why It's Great to be Young', 1967, p.6.
[92] Thomson, *Lost Freedom,* p.221.
[93] Emmerson, 'No to the Cane'.

Black supplementary schools movement in their work against structural racism in the English education system.

5.2 Black Supplementary Schools and A Radical Pedagogy of Self-Esteem

The Black supplementary schools movement emerged in Britain in the late 1960s and represented a profound reimagining of what self-esteem could mean in the context of systemic racism and educational marginalisation. While mainstream educational discourse increasingly individualised self-feeling as a psychological trait to be measured and enhanced through targeted interventions, Black parent groups, educators, and children developed an alternative framework that was simultaneously personal and political, individual and collective. This movement did not simply adopt prevailing notions of self-esteem. It simultaneously used self-feeling as a lens through which to understand the emotional impact of systemic racism, and constructed its own critical psychology which exposed the cultural biases inherent in mainstream approaches to self-feeling. Black supplementary schools developed unique pedagogical practices designed to unlock feelings of innate self-worth through cultural reconnection and collective empowerment. This section examines how the Black supplementary schools movement developed its distinctive critical psychology of self-esteem through three interconnected dimensions: parents' construction of collective approaches to self-worth that challenged individualistic frameworks; educators' engagement with and critique of mainstream psychological theories to develop alternative pedagogical practices; and children's creative expressions that reframed self-esteem as a political right systematically denied through racist educational structures. Black supplementary schools constituted a direct response to the systematic violation of Black children's right to positive self-image through racist educational practices. Supplementary schools emerged as contested emotional frontiers where self-esteem was reclaimed and redefined, challenging the isolating tendencies of mainstream psychological discourse by positioning self-worth as both a collective right and a form of resistance to educational racism.

The movement emerged within broader patterns of discrimination facing Caribbean immigrants in post-war Britain. The 1948 British Nationality Act permitted Commonwealth citizens to enter and settle in Britain, with Caribbean migration peaking between 1955 and

1962 as families reunited.[94] However, as Kehinde Andrews argues, initial migration incentives were not 'a benevolent act' and subsequent settlements became, for many, 'an unintended, and often [...] unwelcome, consequence of migration'.[95] This hostility manifested in increasingly restrictive immigration legislation throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with cross-party consensus that immigration from 'New Commonwealth' countries should be curtailed.[96] The persistence of discrimination was reflected in socioeconomic outcomes. By the 1970s, unemployment among young Black people in Britain was twice that of their white counterparts.[97]

Discriminatory practices crystallised within state education. In the 1960s, Haringey Council introduced a system of 'banding' which involved 'an artificial redrawing of catchment areas based on certain criteria' including 'ability' and being defined as an 'immigrant child'. The policy was put forward in the infamous Doulton Report which made assertions about the supposedly lower IQ of West Indian children, meaning that any distinction Doulton attempted to draw between ability and immigration status was 'dangerously blurred'.[98] Alongside banding and bussing practices, some LEAs achieved de facto segregation through disproportionate placement of West Indian children in educationally sub-normal (ESN) schools.[99]

As Sally Tomlinson argues, the educational establishment 'could not admit to, or were not aware of' the relationship between colonialism and immigration to Britain, leaving them unprepared or resistant to introducing effective changes that would allow for equal education in a multiracial society. Instead, migrant children and parents were blamed for educational deficiencies, branded as less intelligent through standardised tests designed for the White population.[100] Teachers reported finding Creole and dialect speech 'sloppy and lazy', despite government-published findings which highlighted that language and dialect use were not a cause of underachievement.[101] Immigrant children were euphemistically labelled

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[94] Kehinde Andrews, *Resisting Racism: Race, Inequality, and the Supplementary School Movement* (London: Institute of Education Press, 2013), p.3.
[95] Ibid., p.2.
[96] Sally Tomlinson, *Education and Race from Empire to Brexit* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2019), p.89.
The term 'New Commonwealth' was used for nations predominantly in Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia where Black and Brown migrants were coming to Britain from, in contrast to the 'Old Commonwealth' countries which had predominantly – or were ruled by - white settler populations.
[97] Ibid., p.96.
[98] Oliver Esteves, *The "Desegregation" of English Schools: Bussing, Race and Urban Space, 1960s-80s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp.111-2.
[99] Ibid., p.108.
[100] Tomlinson, *Education and Race*, pp.84-5.
[101] Ibid., p.107.

'disadvantaged', which categorised them alongside poor white children and obscured the role of systemic racism in educational outcomes.[102]

From the late 1970s, central government and some LEAs published policy documents for education in multicultural societies which placed 'responsibility for adaption and adjustments' with immigrant families.[103] This denial of racism, labelled 'educational nationalism' by Tomlinson, shifted the onus onto immigrant families to address their supposed deficiencies. Even when racism's impact was acknowledged, as in the 1977 Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration report which recommended an inquiry into the underachievement of West Indian children, Black educationalists expressed frustration at attempts to broaden inquiries to cover all ethnic groups, neglecting the specific cultural context of the Afro-Caribbean experience.[104] Resulting reports were published in 1981 and 1985 and reflected more systematic attempts to document links between racist attitudes and educational outcomes.[105] However, both reports received criticism for their treatment of racism: the 1981 Rampton Report for using indefinite language that 'trivialise[d] the importance placed on racism as a major factor', and the 1985 Swann Report for 'reducing' the issue of racism to one chapter and failing to provide specific recommendations.[106]

Jessica Gerrard characterises experiences of racism in post-war England – increasingly apparent inequalities in education, right-wing attacks on Black businesses and police brutality – as 'persistent and unifying' and represented the backdrop for the emergence of Black politics.[107] Collective resistance to racist practices had existed alongside immigration to Britain since at least the 1950s, through community newspapers, businesses, movements, and events like Carnival.[108] In education specifically, organisations like the North London West Indian Association (NLWIA) launched campaigns against 'bussing' and 'banding' practices in Haringey, called for more Black teachers 'emotionally and culturally attuned' to children's needs, and advocated for greater parental involvement in school governance.[109] By the 1970s,

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[102] Ibid., p.105.
[103] Ibid., p.108.
[104] Ibid., p.109.; Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration Session 1976-7, *The West Indian Community*, Volume 1, HMSO, 17 February 1977; London Metropolitan Archives, Afro-Caribbean Education Resource (ACER), LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, 'Rampton Follow-up Report: Racism & the Black Child', 1982.
[105] Committee of Inquiry, *West Indian Children*, 1981.; Committee of Inquiry, *Education for All*, 1985.
[106] London Metropolitan Archives, LMA/4463/D/11/01/001, Willis Wilkie, Reflections on Young Black Pupils Talking for Young Black Pupils Conference, 1989.
[107] Jessica Gerrard, 'Self-Help and Protest: The Emergence of Black Supplementary Schooling in England', *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 16.1 (2013), pp.38-9.
[108] Ibid., p.33.
[109] Andrews, *Resisting Racism*, p.12.

a second generation of Caribbean immigrants who had been partially or entirely educated in Britain were becoming increasingly aware of the disadvantages they faced. With rising unemployment, deteriorating relations with the police, and awareness of civil rights movements in the USA and anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa, young Black people in Britain became more receptive to a 'militant black identity'.[110] Many of these young people had been born in Britain and were keenly aware of the disparity between their treatment and that of their White counterparts. Safe Black spaces reflected how Blackness had become a collective 'route for identification' in a racist society.[111]

Black teachers and educationalists also shared these criticisms. By the early 1970s, some teachers had begun to recognise the problems of blaming immigrant children for educational failures. A 1971 collection of essays by teachers called *The Multiracial School* demonstrated that some practitioners recognised issues with curriculum and classroom dynamics that disadvantaged Black children. They also recognised that white children needed an approach to education that would 'combat the indifference and hostility that exists between different national and racial groups'.[112] However, it was the publication of Bernard Coard's *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System* in 1971 that catalysed these sentiments and helped channel them into a burgeoning movement of supplementary schools. As a Caribbean-born educator working in London, Coard connected educational inequality with racism, community frustration, and the need for a community-oriented response.[113]

Coard used ILEA reports to demonstrate the 'oversubscription of Black children' in schools for the 'educationally subnormal' (ESN).[114] This was exacerbated by immigrant parents' misunderstanding of the British system, often believing ESN schools described as 'special' were 'especially good'.[115] Coupling quantitative evidence with arguments about cultural bias, Coard highlighted 'racist presumptions of ignorance and incapability' among teachers and psychologists assessing Black children.[116] He identified three detrimental teacher attitudes:

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[110] Ibid., p.3.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Julia McNeal and Margaret Rogers, *The Multi-Racial School: A Professional Perspective* (London: Penguin, 1971), cited in Tomlinson, *Education and Race*, p.86.
[113] Esteves, '"Desegregation" of English Schools', p.108.
[114] Gerrard, 'Self-Help and Protest' pp.32-3.
[115] Bernard Coard, *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System* (London: New Beacon Books, 1971), p.9.
[116] Gerrard, 'Self-Help and Protest' pp.32-3.

patronising, explicitly prejudiced, and low expectations for immigrant children.[117] He described placement in ESN schools as 'a one-way educational ticket' with long-lasting consequences for economic prospects and future generations.[118]

Central to Coard's analysis was the argument that these processes inflicted profound psychological damage. He argued that labelling children as educationally sub-normal, combined with overt racism, led to internalised feelings of inferiority. According to Coard, the impact of 'other people's expectations' on children's self-image was 'immense', with direct effects on academic performance.[119] Against this backdrop, Coard advocated cultivating pride through cultural education to build psychological resilience. He described 'pride and self-confidence' as 'the best armour against prejudice and humiliating experiences' Black children could expect in British society.[120] Significantly, he envisioned supplementary schools as collective community projects where 'Black parents, teachers, educational psychologists, social workers and community leaders' would 'galvanise and organise' to address the educational crisis.[121]

By the early 1970s, small groups representing cross-sections of the Black community in several British cities had established weekend and evening classrooms in convenient, affordable spaces including living rooms and community centres. The Southall Caribbean Parents Group (SCPG) secured accommodation at St Anselm's Catholic Church after direct appeal. Schools catered for all ages, though some emphasised early childhood education to break cycles of generational disadvantage.[122] While starting small, schools quickly expanded. The SCPG saw Saturday class enrolment rise from 18 students in 1979 to 33 a year later.[123] Though most were London-based, others emerged in Nottingham, Birmingham, Sheffield, and Manchester. Interest in the schools was strong. In 1985, the Queen Mother Moore School attracted around 400 visitors to its open day.[124] Initially staffed by volunteers teaching

[117] Coard, *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal*, p.18
[118] Ibid., p.6.
[119] Ibid., p.10.
[120] Gerrard, 'Self-Help and Protest', p.33.
[121] Coard, *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal*, p.37.
[122] London Metropolitan Archives, Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Caribbean Parents Group Five Year Review 1975-1980.
[123] Ibid.
[124] London Metropolitan Archives, Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, Queen Mother Moore School Annual Report 1985-86, 1986.

mainstream curriculum elements and culturally specific content, schools increasingly relied on state funding from the 1980s onwards.[125]

Despite several attempts to establish a national network, Black Supplementary Schools never formed a particularly cohesive movement.[126] Schools were largely independent from one another, but they shared radical political standpoints and attended conferences on themes including the future of the movement.[127] As Heidi Mirza and Diane Reay argue, the schools were 'far more radical and subversive' than simple responses to poor provision. They created pedagogical and ideological alternatives to White normative environments where 'whiteness is displaced as central and blackness is seen as normative'.[128] Indeed, the schools were often explicitly radical, named after Black civil rights leaders, activists, and revolutionaries. Their radical nature prompted suspicion from authorities, with some facing 'enormous harassment from the police and from the caretakers at the schools'.[129]

Influenced by Coard, the schools centred self-esteem as both a symptom of education in a racist society and a practical means of overcoming it. A proposal for the establishment of an Association of Supplementary Schools in London from the 1980s outlined the impact of racism and cultural erasure on Black children:

> It was not only in the area of the academic subjects that the system had failed our children. It had and has continued to disregard the cultural contribution which the Black community was and is making to the society generally. Thus, in an attempt to deny the existence of a valid Black culture it had tried desperately to assimilate our Black children into the so-called British culture and by so doing undermine the self-concept and identity of the Black child.[130]

This recognition of racism's psychological and emotional dimension became central to supplementary schools' missions. They represented profound collective resistance extending beyond remedying academic shortfalls to challenging foundations of how Black children saw

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[125] Andrews, *Resisting Racism*, pp.44-5.
[126] London Metropolitan Archives, Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4774/C/01/07/003, Proposal for the Establishment of an Association of Supplementary Schools in London, (undated).
[127] London Metropolitan Archives, Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, Association of Black Supplementary Schools Conference Report on Black Supplementary Schools: Past, Present and Future, 1982.
[128] Heidi Mirza and Diane Reay, 'Spaces and Places of Black Education Desire: Rethinking Black Supplementary Schools as a New Social Movement', *Sociology* 43.3 (2000), p.521.
[129] LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, Association of Black Supplementary Schools Conference Report', 1982.
[130] LMA/4774/C/01/07/003, Proposal for the Establishment of an Association, (undated).

themselves in English society. By creating spaces where Blackness was normative rather than marginal, the movement established an alternative educational framework positioning self-esteem not as an individualised psychological trait to be improved, but as a collective resource cultivated through cultural affirmation and community solidarity. This distinctive approach to self-esteem as communal rather than personal, as resistance rather than adjustment, would define the movement's radical challenge to mainstream education in 1970s and 1980s England.

This conceptualisation of self-esteem was often developed by groups of parents, who met regularly to discuss the problems they faced and organised responses, including the provision of supplementary classes. One such group was the Southall Caribbean Parents Group (SCPG), one of London's most active groups of West Indian parents. Founded in the mid-1970s, it ran volunteer-led supplementary classes in Acton and Southall, funded through community donations. Affiliated with local organisations, the SCPG aimed to bridge communication gaps with schools, challenge educational prejudice, and counter the marginalisation of Black children into ESN schools.[131] Its work combined academic support with a broader effort to rebuild collective identity and self-worth, rejecting the individualised models of self-esteem dominant in mainstream education. Its work was underpinned by a conviction that racism in schools 'undermined the children's self-confidence and self-esteem'.[132] This passage explores how parents within such groups shared experiences on behalf of their children, centring self-esteem in their narratives of racism, and developed in response an expansive model of self-esteem rooted in ancestry, cultural heritage and community bonds. It was an intergenerational understanding that recognised that adults and the elderly as well as children could benefit from and contribute to this form of collective approach to self-esteem.

Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe's 1984 collection *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* documented the high expectations that many parents had for British education. The authors noted that education was 'regarded [...] as a kind of liberation' in post-emancipation Caribbean society, providing one of the few routes out of 'poverty and

[131] London Metropolitan Archives, Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4774/C/01/01/002, Caribbean Parents Group, Annual General Report 1975-6.
[132] London Metropolitan Archives, Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4463/D/03/03, Conference Programme, June 1980.

exploitation'.[133] This cultural value placed on education was reinforced by the 'competitive, selective' nature of Caribbean schooling, which made parents acutely aware of the need for academic success.[134] Parents had therefore arrived with what Willis Wilkie – a social worker and chairman of the SCPG – described as an implicit faith and confidence in the British education system.[135] The reality they faced in Britain proved devastating for many parents. Sally Tomlinson has documented the shock experienced by immigrant parents when confronted with the discrimination their children faced in schools.[136] Activist, writer, and headteacher of George Padmore Black Community School John La Rose described how hopes of mobility akin to emancipation were dashed as children left school often unable to read, write or count.[137] Through their own observations and the work of activists like Bernard Coard, parents discovered that rather than receiving superior education, their children were being systematically disadvantaged, with many placed in Educationally Subnormal (ESN) schools through culturally biased testing and assessment procedures.

Within groups like the SCPG, parents met to share their encounters with racism within the school system and share knowledge. Parents uncovered shared experiences. For example, when they articulated their high academic aspirations for their children, they found themselves criticised by teachers for harbouring 'unrealistic aspirations and ambitions'.[138] Others found that their children were invariably characterised as 'inherently non-academic and over-ambitious'.[139] As Coard had observed, parents also misunderstood what ESN schools were, particularly when the phrase 'special schools' was used to refer to ESN institutions. The misunderstanding was rarely acknowledged or corrected. This pattern of deception and was powerfully captured in a testimony in Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe's collection, where one parent remembered

> At first I didn't realise what was going on because I really thought they were sending her to a 'special' school. The school sent me a letter telling me they were going to transfer her and that she'd get more attention, they never really spelt out what kind of school it was. But when I went up and visited, the penny dropped. As soon as I saw

[133] Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Verso, 1984), pp.32-3.
[134] Ibid., p.36.
[135] LMA/4463/D/03/03, Conference Programme, June 1980.
[136] Tomlinson, *Education and Race*, p.85.
[137] LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, 'Conference Report on Black Supplementary Schools', 1982.
[138] Ibid.
[139] LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Caribbean Parents Group Five Year Review 1975-1980.

> that most of the other kids there were Black, I knew something was going on. […] That's how they came to set up the Saturday school, because everyone was saying if the schools wouldn't educate our children, we should do it ourselves.[140]

These shared experiences of collisions between expectation and reality catalysed parents into action. Their disappointment transformed into activism as they recognised that the system itself, rather than their children's abilities, was responsible for educational underachievement.

Beyond a disillusionment with the quality and nature of the British education system, parents began to articulate the emotional and psychological toll that racism had taken on their children. These psychological injuries became a central concern for parent groups and a key justification for establishing supplementary schools. Parents reported witnessing their children come home with what they termed 'mental bruises' – psychological injuries inflicted in schools that damaged their self-esteem and confidence.[141] Equating mental injury with physical abuse, the SCPG explicitly condemned the 'physical abuse and psychological damage to children' in mainstream schools, which included derogatory name-calling and negative labelling that undermined children's sense of self-confidence.[142] Beverley Bryan documented the 'trauma' that the first generation of Black children in British schools suffered, which was 'largely ignored' by education authorities. This trauma was compounded by the 'enormous' pressure many children felt to succeed academically, given both cultural expectations and their parents' hopes that education would allow them to escape the 'menial, low-paid work they had been forced to accept'.[143]

Parents described the struggle of finding methods 'of supporting and reassuring' their children who faced physical and psychological consequences of racism in their schools. One mother's testimony captured this poignantly:

> When I sent my daughter to school, I can remember her coming home one day and asking me why God had made her Black. That really hurt me. I asked her if she didn't like being Black, and she said no, she didn't, because she was the only Black child in her school. I told her God chose to make some of us Black and some of us white, and there's no difference between us. But still she didn't want me to plait her hair, I had to

[140] Bryan et al, *Heart of the Race*, p.36.
[141] Ibid., p.34.
[142] London Metropolitan Archives, Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4774/C/01/07/002, Statement by the Caribbean Parents Group to the Education Committee, (undated).
[143] Bryan et al, *Heart of the Race*, p.33.

> put it in a ponytail all the time, otherwise she would cry, because all the other kids had their hair flowing down […] That made me aware that there was a lot of prejudice in the schools that was affecting the kids deeply.[144]

In sharing their experiences, parents understood that the psychological consequences of racist bullying and harassment at school was not only felt at the individual, personal level for their children, but was attached to questions about their identity. Parents groups like the SCPG set out their mission both to address injuries to self-concept and to instil collective pride in identity. This commitment was outlined at an SCPG day conference held at the Southall Community Centre in June 1980. In his opening address, SCPG coordinator Willis Wilkie emphasised that the conference would focus on two main points:

> (a) the notion of self-concept as a facilitator to learning and achievement and how parents along with schools, or even in the absence of the schools' help, can motivate and sustain this very important concept, and (b) the need for black identity and the important role it has to play in both the cultural and academic life of the youngster and in the totality of his being.[145]

In line with these commitments, parents felt a responsibility to find ways to restore their children's sense of self-worth. Although members of the SCPG described themselves as 'shattered and disappointed' by their experiences with the education system, they expressed a determination 'to restore [their] children's confidence in their own abilities and to recover their self-esteem'.[146] They set out to establish supplementary educational spaces where both academic achievement and cultural pride could be nurtured simultaneously. The teaching within parent-led supplementary schools was explicitly designed to address both emotional and educational needs. Emotional wellbeing and remedial self-esteem building were understood as necessary precursors to academic success. As Wilkie reflected, 'it [is] our duty to motivate our children and to endeavour to give them the self-confidence and self-assurance which is necessary for them to succeed'.[147]

Alongside providing supplementary classes for children, another key part of the early work of parents' groups was promoting parental education. In the late 1960s, Black activists and

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[144] Ibid., p.34.
[145] LMA/4463/D/03/03, Conference Programme, June 1980.
[146] London Metropolitan Archives, LMA/4463/D/11/02/005, Willis Wilkie, Draft of a Tract on Supplementary Education, 1980.
[147] LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Five Year Review 1975 -1980.

educators began holding seminars specifically for parents. Prominent figures like Jocelyn Barrow from the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) and Winston Best, Education Officer of the North London West Indian Association, organised meetings to explain how the education system disadvantaged their children. These seminars were attended by more than 60 parents and covered practical matters like addressing children's anxieties at school, but also focused on empowering parents to set objectives and advocate for systemic change. The popularity of these gatherings demonstrated what La Rose called 'the extent and depth of the black parental feeling in connection with the education of their children in the British school system'.[148]

Parents' own experiences were an important part of the reformulating of a new culture of self-esteem in the supplementary schools movement. Based on their experiences as immigrants, as well as the ideas they were exposed to by Black activists and educators, they helped shape a version of self-concept that was fundamentally collective and community-oriented. Parent groups conceptualised self-esteem as a shared resource that belonged to and required the participation of the entire community. This community-oriented approach was evident in the concerns expressed by Fennis Augustine, the High Commissioner of Grenada, at the 1980 SCPG conference. Speaking about the high unemployment rates affecting young Black people, Augustine framed confidence-building as a collective responsibility:

> The confidence of our black children is being undermined and eroded at all levels and we felt it was the duty of the black community to restore confidence in our young people. Black parents should be more supportive of their children and should not leave their children's education wholly to the schools.[149]

At the same conference, educator and activist Jocelyn Barrow emphasised the need for parents to work 'collectively as a pressure group' in their efforts to recover their children's self-confidence. She stressed that collective action would help parents become well-informed about their shared cultural roots, which they could pass onto their children as a means of countering negative labelling and stereotyping in schools by instilling pride in Black identity.[150] The SCPG's constitutional objectives reflected this community orientation, stating that success for the community and improving 'all round educational standard' depended on 'the possession of a positive self-image by "successful" parents and children, as well as those

[148] LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, 'Conference Report on Black Supplementary Schools' 1982.
[149] LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Five Year Review 1975 -1980.
[150] Ibid.

obviously failing'.[151] Where self-confidence was seen to originate from attainment in mainstream education, here it was an important pre-requisite. This conception positioned confidence as a shared attribute rooted in community rather than measured directly against individual educational attainment.

Another way in which the model of self-esteem constructed by parents' groups was expansive, was in the way that it was conceived as distinctively multigenerational, extending beyond children to include parents, grandparents and elders in the community. This vertical extension of self-esteem across generations created a temporally expansive understanding of self-concept that contrasted with the child-focused approaches in mainstream education.[152] Parent groups recognised that adults' own experiences of racism paralleled those of their children. Beverley Bryan and colleagues noted that Black mothers often identified the 'cruel rejection' of their children with their 'similar daily experiences in the workplace'.[153] Parents' reactions to hearing about their children's experiences of racism were described as 'bewildered or angry', particularly as they were simultaneously struggling to articulate their own experiences of workplace discrimination.[154] Parents were also offered their own educational seminars at institutions like the Roehampton Institute of Higher Education and Lambeth Teachers Centre, reinforcing the idea that educational development was a community-wide process.[155]

There were also attempts to extend this vision horizontally across the community with a triangular approach to schooling adopted by some supplementary organisations. Unlike mainstream schools, where parental involvement was often limited, supplementary schools made these three-way relationships central to their operational structure. John La Rose's George Padmore Black Community School exemplified this approach, refusing to admit children unless both parent and child accepted the school's aims and purpose. This policy required lengthy meetings with both parties before enrolment, ensuring shared commitment to the school's vision. The school also mandated monthly meetings between parents and teachers, deliberately scheduling these on weekends to accommodate parents' work commitments – a consideration rarely made by mainstream schools.[156] This triangulation

[151] Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4774/C/01/01/002, Minutes of General Meeting, 14th September 1975.
[152] With the notable exception of the PPA where maternal self-esteem was enmeshed in ideas about childhood self-feeling.
[153] Bryan et al, *Heart of the Race*, p.34.
[154] Ibid.
[155] LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, 'Queen Mother Moore School Annual Report', 1986.
[156] LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, 'Black Supplementary Schools Conference Report', 1982.

wasn't merely administrative but represented a fundamental philosophical stance on education as a community endeavour. The Queen Mother Moore School visually represented this philosophy on the cover of its 1985 handbook with an illustration of a triangle symbolising the relationship between parent, teacher and child.[157] The school celebrated this relationship through regular 'parent-teacher-child' days, providing parents with structured opportunities to understand mainstream school curricula and develop strategies to support their children's education.[158]

As part of these broad, elongated visions of self-concept, parents' groups sought to enhance their own self-esteem alongside that of their children. The Southall Caribbean Parents Group included in its constitutional objectives a commitment to giving *parents* confidence so they would be sure of their ability 'to help in the education of their children'.[159] A spokesperson later described this aim of increasing parents' confidence to intervene in their children's education as 'the foremost aim of the organisation'.[160] The group recognised that parents themselves often experienced diminished self-esteem through interactions with schools and teachers. Parents reported being made to feel 'foolish', 'bewildered' or 'isolated' when trying to address educational problems. Others described being made to feel 'obligated to them [schools] for accepting the children' or were told that teachers could not understand their accent or dialect – experiences that served to 'sap their confidence and insult their intelligence'.[161]

The intergenerational approach extended to elders in the community as well. The SCPG's materials for their 1985 AGM included information about community care for Black elderly people, emphasising the importance of 'maintaining their dignity, self-respect and usefulness in this very divisive and racist society'.[162] The older population were not just framed as potential recipients of self-esteem but as providers and facilitators of it. Grandparents in particular were valued as representatives of 'walking and living history' and possessors of cultural knowledge and traditions deemed essential for children's education and identity formation.[163] This intergenerational approach created a distinctive model of self-esteem that

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[157] London Metropolitan Archives, Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4774/C/01/07/002, Queen Mother Moore School Handbook, 1985.
[158] LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, Queen Mother Moore School Annual Report, 1986.
[159] LMA/4774/C/01/01/002, Caribbean Parents Group, Annual General Report 1975-6.
[160] LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Caribbean Parents Group Five Year Review 1975 -1980.
[161] LMA/4774/C/01/07/002, 'Statement by the Caribbean Parents Group', (undated).
[162] London Metropolitan Archives, Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4463/D/03/01/001, Correspondence Over 1985 AGM, 1985.
[163] LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, 'Conference Report on Black Supplementary Schools', 1982.

flowed across generational boundaries rather than being confined to individual children. It recognised that the psychological effects of racism impacted entire family systems and communities across generations, requiring an equally expansive response.

The emphasis on intergenerational learning was also evident in the group's focus on historical consciousness. Parents explicitly connected contemporary educational struggles to historical experiences of oppression, creating an expansive understanding of self-concept that extended backward through time as well as across the community. For members of the SCPG, this historical perspective was evident in their analysis of practices like corporal punishment in English schools:

> The English person is violent to children and they want to tell us that we are violent to our children. We have had this violence meted out to us from slave masters and has been imparted from one generation to the next. […] Liberal minded West Indian parents have always shunned corporal punishment as a method of discipline.[164]

Parents situated current educational practices within a lineage of colonial violence and resistance. By invoking the history of slavery and colonialism, they positioned their children's experiences within a broader historical narrative, expanding self-concept beyond the individual to encompass collective historical memory. Importantly, they also asserted their own counter-narrative of discipline, rejecting the stereotypes imposed on them while claiming their own traditions of child-rearing. Self-esteem, in this framework, required an understanding of historical and political context – it was not merely about feeling good about oneself in isolation, but about situating one's identity within a proud historical tradition of resistance.

This historically-grounded approach to self-esteem offered a powerful counternarrative to the reported shame-inducing effects of racism. By teaching children about their history and cultural achievements, supplementary schools created an expansive self-concept that drew strength from collective historical memory. As one parent noted about their child's experience:

[164] LMA/4774/C/01/07/002, Statement by the Caribbean Parents Group to the Education Committee, (undated).

> My daughter really got a lot out of those sessions, because it wasn't just about reading and writing. They taught the kids about Black history and showed them that they had nothing to be ashamed of because Black people are as good as anyone else.[165]

As well as history, the collective vision of self-esteem was centred on notions of cultural identity and shared heritage, which could be drawn on for identity and positive self-image. Parent groups explicitly linked cultural knowledge, historical awareness and positive self-image, creating an approach to self-esteem that was rooted in ancestry and shared history rather than individual achievement or personal traits. At the 1980 SCPG conference, Yvonne Collymore spoke on the theme of identity, advocating that children of West Indian origin should be encouraged to identify with the Caribbean as a whole, rather than their individual islands of origin. Despite some reservations about whether a unified 'West Indian' culture existed, Collymore insisted that a strong, coherent sense of identity was crucial for young people living 'in a very divisive society.[166] She explicitly connected cultural identity and self-concept, declaring to the conference that 'cultural identity and good self-image are inter-related and are very important contributory factors to learning and achievement'.[167] Jocelyn Barrow similarly urged parents to help their children develop positive self-image 'by becoming acquainted with their own history and culture'. She encouraged parents to create home environments that would give children the confidence to cope with external prejudice, while preparing them to confront rather than avoid the realities of racism.[168] Other organisations shared this cultural focus. The Camden Black Parents and Teachers group promoted materials from the Afro-Caribbean Educational Resource (ACER) that dealt with self-image positively, and praised pioneering groups like the Marcus Garvey nursery in Birmingham for promoting positive cultural identity.[169] In Sheffield, the Black Parents Action Group on Education emphasised the importance of parent-led organisations in combating racist systems that 'prevent the positive development of Black pupils' by denying their cultural heritage and failing to provide positive role models.[170]

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[165] Bryan et al, *Heart of the Race*, p.36.
[166] LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Caribbean Parents Group Five Year Review 1975 -1980.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid.
[169] London Metropolitan Archives, Camden Black Parents and Teachers Group, LMA/4774/C/03/07/001, Minutes of the Camden Black Parents and Teachers Group, 6th April 1985.
[170] Sheffield Local Studies Library, Sheffield and District Afro-Caribbean Express, Issue 5: Souvenir edition, (undated).

The final way parents constructed an expansive version of self-esteem which informed their actions and culture as a group was by making self-esteem future-oriented, connecting present struggles to long-term community survival and resistance, particularly in the 1980s. This temporal dimension extended self-esteem beyond immediate psychological benefits to encompass broader struggles for racial justice and community empowerment. Parents frequently invoked the future when expressing their frustrations with the education system. One participant in Bryan's study lamented:

> They [the schools] were pretending to do so much for people's children, and in the end they were doing nothing. They mucked up my kids and other people's children too, with their false pretences. They gave those children nothing to aim for in the future.[171]

This concern transcended individual children to encompass an entire generation of West Indian immigrants and their descendants. The Queen Mother Moore School adopted a similarly future-oriented approach on the cover of its 1985 handbook which asserted 'an investment in the minds of our children is an investment in the future of our people'.[172]

This future-orientation could be a direct response to shifts in the political climate and served as a way of highlighting how pressing the need was to protect children against not only the physical but the psychological threats to them in an increasingly hostile society. In 1980, amid rising far-right activism and increasingly hostile racial discourse, the SCPG outlined a forward-looking strategy:

> The way forward for the Parent Group and other black organisations must be a) confidence building in the minds of our children, b) support to our parents in supporting their children, c) we must be resolute by campaigning for our survival and self-respect and most importantly adequate education for our children. We must be determined to establish our own schools. Black schools staffed by members of the black community as a serious alternative to the present system in which professionally dishonest teachers refuse to teach our children thereby creating a policy of academic genocide on black children.[173]

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[171] Bryan et al, *Heart of the Race*, p.37.
[172] LMA/4774/C/01/07/002, Queen Mother Moore School Handbook, 1985.
[173] LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Caribbean Parents Group Five Year Review 1975 -1980.

The use of terms like 'survival' and 'genocide' revealed the high stakes associated with cultivating a proud identity in a racist society. Self-esteem was not merely about making children feel good; it was fundamentally linked to community survival and resistance. Unlike the 'quick fix' approaches to self-esteem emerging in mainstream educational discourse, the supplementary school movement recognised the magnitude of their task. Willis Wilkie acknowledged that filling the attainment gap and developing cultural awareness was 'a very tall order' given that it meant challenging entrenched racist practices in English society.[174]

This was a fundamental reimagining of what self-concept could mean and how it could be reasserted in the context of racial oppression. Rather than hinder collective anti-racist action it was integrated into a vision of the past, present and future as a symptom of oppression and as a means to overcome it. Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe describe this vision of collective action:

> We have come to recognise that it is the bonds we have in common because of our history and our experience of racism and sexism which unite us... Through the choices we are making about our lives and the values which we are imparting to our children, we are making it clear that in whatever ways the society tries to constrain us, *we will break free*... It is this firm and durable tradition of drawing strength and purpose from the culture in which our experience is grounded that is Black women's most precious legacy to the next generation.[175]

Confidence and pride were collective, intergenerational, and rooted in cultural heritage and historical consciousness. Although supplementary schooling was new, Jessica White's work on Black female selfhood is useful in describing longer traditions of community-oriented or relational Black selfhood which 'diverged from traditional Western theories of self' which frame the individual self as 'unique' and the process of developing and constructing selfhood 'an individual act'. White finds that Black female selfhood and life stories:

> often incorporated the memories of their families, reflected a shared consciousness with their grandmothers and mothers, and articulated selves formed of the different lineages of their female kin.[176]

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[174] LMA/4463/D/11/02/005, Willis Wilkie, Draft of a Tract, 1980.
[175] Bryan et al, *Heart of the Race*, p.95.
[176] Jessica White, 'Black Women's Groups, Life Narratives, and the Construction of the Self in Late Twentieth-Century Britain', *The Historical Journal* 65 (2022), p.802.

In this framework, self-worth could not be seen as a personal trait to be improved in isolation, but as something shaped by community, cultural identity, and shared struggle. This approach transformed what might have been individual psychological wounds into opportunities for collective healing and resistance. The restoration of self-esteem became not just a psychological intervention but a political act that connected present struggles to historical legacies of both oppression and resistance. Groups like the SCPG operationalised their vision through inclusive structures that valued parental involvement, elder wisdom, and cultural affirmation. By framing children as custodians of the community's future, the movement positioned self-esteem as a communal responsibility and a strategy for long-term survival and resistance. This expansive approach laid the foundation for specific pedagogical practices designed to enhance self-worth through collective pride and cultural affirmation.

As well as developing a framework of self-esteem based on collective experience, the supplementary schools movement also engaged critically with mainstream psychology and developed its own unique 'critical psychology' – a practice which involves a critique of the 'dominant narratives, established norms, theories, and frameworks' that 'give support to oppressive structures'.[177] Within the Black supplementary schools movement, this critique specifically targeted the White normativity, cultural bias, and 'homogenising gaze' embedded within both psychology and mainstream teaching practices.

By highlighting the construction of a critical psychology within the Black supplementary schools movement, this passage sheds further light on the historical shift in approaches to Black identity described by William Cross. Cross identified a transformation from a pre-1960s focus on 'Black self-hatred' – a model that assumed oppression would inevitably produce negative self-perceptions both individually and collectively – to a post-1960s 'more positive' approach characterised by 'self-acceptance and a preference for things Black'.[178] However, as Cross himself acknowledged, this linear model oversimplifies a complex historical process. By examining the Black supplementary schools movement through the lens of its engagement with psychology, this section adds important context and nuance to Cross' framework, revealing how communities actively constructed alternative psychological approaches rather than merely shifting from one dominant paradigm to another.

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[177] Cerisse Gunasinghe, 'Frameworks', in *Reimagining Race in Psychology* eds. Yetunde Ade-Serrano and Ohemaa Nkansa-Dwamena (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), p.8.
[178] Allen, *Concept of Self*, p.60.

Far from operating in isolation from mainstream academic discourse, the Black supplementary school movement actively engaged with, critiqued, and subverted psychological theories about race, identity, and education. While most accounts of the movement focus primarily on the role of concerned parents and teachers, academic psychology was in fact a prominent theme in the movement's discourse, informing both its critiques of mainstream education and its development of alternative pedagogical approaches. Parents and educators within the movement were well-versed in psychological theories, regularly exposed to them through literature, seminars, and conferences that placed particular emphasis on self-concept as part of their political consciousness-raising.

Bernard Coard's *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System* exemplified this engagement with psychological theory. Coard's analysis was fundamentally psychological, highlighting how the British educational system functioned to marginalise Black children by suppressing their language and dialect, and by replacing authentic notions of identity with negative labels and stereotypes. Coard explicitly drew on psychological concepts to articulate his critique:

> This is the *conditioning effect* of what psychologists call *word association* on people's minds. If every reference on TV, radio, newspapers, reading books and story books in school shows "black" as being horrible and ugly, and everything "white" as being pure, clean and beautiful, then people begin to think this way on racial matters.[179]

Coard also directly challenged educational psychologist Arthur Jensen's theories about supposed genetic factors in racial IQ differences, pointedly labelling him 'the Enoch Powell of the academic world' for perpetuating 'the myth of Black inferiority' that was used to justify educational segregation practices such as banding and bussing.[180] The movement also confronted Hans Eysenck – Black Paper contributor, Jensen's former pupil and professor of psychiatry at the University of London. In 1971 – the same year that Coard's influential book was circulated – Eysenck published *Race, Intelligence and Education* which concluded that there was 'some degree of genetic inferiority' among Black populations based on lower IQ scores compared to their White counterparts.[181] Parents in the supplementary schools movements echoed Coard's critique of racist psychological theory. As Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe noted in their 1985 sociohistorical study *The Heart of Race*, Black parents in Britain

[179] Coard, *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal*, p.28.
[180] Ibid., p.19-20.
[181] H. J. Eysenck, *Race, Intelligence and Education* (London: Temple Smith Ltd, 1971), pp.141-2.

were acutely aware of such figures and their influence, particularly in the connections drawn between race and intelligence and how these informed cultural stereotypes and 'readily accepted definitions' of Black people in Britain.[182] In response, immigrants in Britain 'built [their] own defences or learnt to reject the lessons and teachers that presented [their] lives in such a derogatory way'.[183]

Black psychiatrists were also platformed to expose and critique psychological ideas and theories at conferences and events. Despite the shortage of practising Black psychologists and psychiatrists in Britain at the time, parents groups like the SCPG actively sought out those who could offer alternative, critical perspectives at conferences and seminars about supplementary education.[184] In 1989, Dr. Omar Daniel spoke at a conference for young Black people coordinated by Willis Wilkie, addressing more than 100 Black pupils about the 'psychological effects' and 'psychological damage' induced by racism in mainstream schools, and urged his audience to 'press the system for reforms to be made'.[185] At the same conference, Dr. Morgan Dalphinis – a teacher and educator from St. Lucia based in London – offered a historical perspective on how dominant psychological norms emerged from colonial power structures and institutions, including schools:

> This kind of institution will do its best to create a psychology in order to fulfil itself. […] So the colours have changed, the people have changed but the institution is there. Thus, if we look at Britain and British institutions like Tate and Lyle with money from slavery, logically, the education system expanded in Britain for the poor people on the basis of slavery. We then need to understand that the psychology then relates to that history.[186]

This kind of critical engagement with psychology and the unpacking of its origins fundamentally influenced how the movement conceptualised self-esteem and identity. Dr. Dalphinis' analysis of psychology reveals the movement's fundamental insight about mainstream psychology, which was that oppressive institutions 'create a psychology in order

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[182] Bryan et al, *Heart of the Race*, p.35.
[183] Ibid.
[184] LMA/4774/C/03/07/001, Minutes of the Camden Black Parents and Teachers Group, 1985.; LMA/4463/D/11/01/001, Willis Wilkie, Reflections on Young Black Pupils, 1989. Speaking to the Camden Black Parents and Teachers Group at a meeting in 1985, educational psychologist Millie Hunte pointed out that were only ten Black educational psychologists working in Britain at the time. In a similar vein, psychiatrist Omar Daniel noted that there were only two Black consultant psychiatrists working in Britain, of which he was one.
[185] London Metropolitan Archives, Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4774/C/01/01/003, Minutes of General Meeting, 16th July 1989.
[186] LMA/4463/D/11/01/001, Willis Wilkie, Reflections on Young Black Pupils, 1989.

to fulfil' oppressive aims and structures. By tracing how Britain's educational psychology emerged from and continued to serve its history as an 'empire builder and slave trader', Dalphinis offered a powerful framework for understanding how mainstream schools 'foster[ed] negative psychological attitudes' in Black children.[187]

A critique of the mainstream schooling which functioned to undermine Black children's self-concept was at the heart of this critical psychology. Dr. Dalphinis articulated this challenge clearly when describing how the school curriculum suppressed Black pupils' self-confidence through deliberate historical erasure. He described how the teaching of history and the prioritisation of colonial conquests served to enhance the self-esteem of colonising peoples and suppress that of the colonised, especially when narratives of resistance were minimised:

> Do you think they are going to say "let us study the slave trade?" or do you think they are going to emphasise their conquests, the greatness of sailing to other seas and their domination of other lands? If it were you attempting to construct a black history in order to give black people self-confidence, which parts of our history would you emphasise? Would you emphasise resistance, would you emphasise famous black scientists? You would not emphasise famous black traitors, would you?[188]

Reflecting the way parents in the movement saw self-esteem as collective and ancestral, here too self-confidence was understood not just as individual psychology but as something produced through historical narratives and representation. The critical psychology that emerged recognised that self-esteem could not be separated from the broader socio-historical contexts that shaped identity formation.

Coard had also provided a specific critique of the way that self-esteem upheld systems of oppression. He criticised approaches that prioritised emotional adjustment over structural change, specifically approaches that focused on socialising Black children to accept their marginalised position, rather than challenging the structures that produce and uphold that marginalisation. For Coard, an education designed to treat the child 'for social adequacy' without targeting the structures and norms that underpinned low expectations were not only insufficient but actively harmful.[189] This argument characterised the critical psychology of

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[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Coard, *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal*, pp.7-8.

self-esteem that emerged in the movement. It challenged psychological approaches that individualised distress and obscured its structural causes.

The movement's critical psychology impulse also saw it engage substantially with the concept of 'Black self-hatred' – a dominant post-war psychological framework that posited oppressed groups would inevitably internalise negative self-perceptions. This concept had gained traction in the 1940s through influential studies like the Clarks' 1940 'doll study' which suggested that Black children would naturally prefer whiteness and develop negative attitudes toward their own racial identity.[190] Coard had observed similar phenomena in London classrooms, where children refused to colour themselves brown in drawings for fear of 'spoiling' the pictures.[191] The language of self-hatred had also been adopted by influential Black commentators and activists. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon invoked a related idea in the 'inferiority complex' that he observed as part of the psychological damage wrought by colonialism and racism.[192] Beverley Bryan wrote about the promotion of 'self-hatred' among the oppressed by colonisers as a central tenet of 'cultural imperialism'. Where this manifested in 1980s society, she goes on, constituted 'neo-colonial practices'.[193] This all seemed to confirm that Black children in White-dominated social settings, such as schools, had an inevitably low self-image. In the post-war period, it became 'conventional wisdom' that Black people in White societies inevitably endured low self-esteem and shame.[194]

Despite acknowledging racism's impact on self-concept, the supplementary schools movement rejected the psychological fatalism accompanying such theories. Rather than accepting self-hatred as inevitable, they recognised that responses were contingent on specific environments and could be transformed through alternative approaches. Coard interrogated methodological assumptions underlying theories about Black self-image, citing studies showing that Black children performed differently with Black examiners versus white ones, and noting that interactions with white examiners could produce heightened aggression upon returning to classrooms.[195] Instead of interpreting findings as evidence of inherent psychological damage, he framed them as contextual responses within white-dominated environments. In recognising that environments produced different responses, the movement

[190] Andrews, *Resisting Racism*, p.6.; Coard, *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal*, p.32.
[191] Coard, *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal*, pp.26-7.
[192] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 1952, trans. by Richard Philcox (London: Grove Press, 2008), p.80.
[193] Bryan et al, *Heart of Race*, p.91.
[194] Cross, *Shades of Black*, pp.ix-x.
[195] Coard, *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal*, pp.23-4.

opened up opportunities and discourses around how self-esteem could be cultivated in Black children.

The rejection of psychological fatalism translated directly into practical guidance for teachers and parents. Speaking at a conference for teachers and young Black pupils, Dr. Omar Daniel explained how self-image formed in early development and stressed that self-respect and positive messaging could buffer against labelling and stereotyping, particularly when rooted in 'feeling good about oneself and one's people'.[196] Movement leaders swiftly incorporated these insights into their educational approach. Willis Wilkie noted that children arriving at their schools often had 'had their confidence shattered' and therefore required 'a great deal of support in helping them regain their self-esteem'.[197]

The movement enlisted parents in this work of psychological reconstruction. At a 1980 SCPG conference on 'the role of Caribbean parents and their children in British schools', educator and activist Jocelyn Barrow spoke to 80 attendees about 'the notion of self-concept and the part parents can play in motivating the child'.[198] Barrow outlined concrete strategies for parents to foster self-esteem, including 'becoming acquainted with their own history and culture', recognising their children's full potential regardless of teachers' lowered expectations, and creating a 'climate and atmosphere within the home' in order to 'give our children the courage and self-confidence to cope with the prejudices of the outside world'.[199] Crucially, Barrow framed this as a collective endeavour, emphasising that Black parents needed mutual support to reconnect with their cultural roots before they could effectively transmit this knowledge to counteract the negative labelling their children encountered in schools.

This critical psychological framework also empowered parents to reinterpret their observations of their children's distress. Parents learned from figures like Dr. Daniel about how the 'insecurity […] despair and hopelessness' that Black children experienced in mainstream schools, combined with racial harassment, contributed to psychological difficulties including diagnoses of schizophrenia, which he noted disproportionately affected the Afro-Caribbean population.[200] Coard similarly described children left 'neurotic by their

[196] LMA/4463/D/11/01/001, Willis Wilkie, Reflections on Young Black Pupils', 1989.
[197] London Metropolitan Archives, Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Annual Report 1988-1989.
[198] LMA/4463/D/03/03, Conference Programme, June 1980.
[199] LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Caribbean Parents Group Five Year Review 1975 -1980.
[200] LMA/4463/D/11/01/001, Willis Wilkie, Reflections on Young Black Pupils', 1989.

school experience' from suppressing 'feelings of ambiguity, ambivalence, and at times despair' at being Black children in a predominantly white society.[201] This kind of exposure to critical psychology encouraged parents to draw their own conclusions about the 'mental bruises' they were observing in their children.[202] Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe documented Black parents' frustration at how educational psychologists and teachers 'largely ignored' the 'traumas' Black children experienced when entering British schools, instead 'flippantly dismissing' their concerns as mere 'culture shock'.[203] Armed with alternative psychological frameworks, parents could articulate these observations not as evidence of individual maladjustment, but as rational responses to systemic racism.

Building on critiques of mainstream psychology more broadly, the movement developed its own, distinctive critical psychology of self-concept that subverted understandings of both self-esteem and self-hatred, which were both popular concepts in post-war psychology. This critical psychology emerged through theoretical engagement and was reinforced by practical educational innovations, resulting in a unique reconciliation of individual psychology and collective experience. While traditional psychological approaches tended to frame self-esteem as something that happened *to* Black children as an inevitable psychological consequence of their social position, the supplementary schools movement positioned it as something that could be actively constructed through consciousness-raising and educational intervention, which is exactly what teachers in the supplementary schools set out to do.

The movement's critical psychology provided the theoretical foundation for its pedagogical innovations and alternative educational provision centred on cultural pride, historical knowledge, and collective empowerment. Although supplementary schools were diverse and distinct from one another, with little central coordination, 'empowerment' was 'a mainstay of the supplementary schools project'.[204] Jessica Gerrard argues that a marker of all the schools in the movement 'was an attempt to celebrate and inculcate identities and shared experiences of black selfhood'.[205] By engaging critically with mainstream psychology and employing this critique in its pedagogy, the movement created educational spaces where self-esteem was reconceptualised not merely as a passive psychological trait to be measured and enhanced,

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[201] Coard, *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal*, p.28.
[202] Bryan et al, *Heart of the Race*, p.34.
[203] Ibid., p.33.
[204] Andrews, *Resisting Racism*, p.72.
[205] Jessica Gerrard, *Radical Childhoods: Schooling and the Struggle for Social Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p.147.

but as a form of active resistance against racist educational structures. In the classroom, teachers and parents developed curricula instead to foster self-esteem through cultural reconnection and pride, in a subversive approach to education that often stood in direct opposition to mainstream ideas about race and self-concept.

To translate their critical psychology into practice, the supplementary schools movement created educational environments specifically designed to nurture self-esteem through representation, cultural affirmation, and historical reconnection. As Heidi Mirza and Diane Reay have argued, the schools 'provide[d] places and spaces in which counter-hegemonic discourses of blackness can be created'.[206] While Kehinde Andrews notes the 'diversity of approaches and philosophies' within the movement, a unifying principle was that 'Black-led environments' would significantly improve educational outcomes and experiences for Black children in Britain.[207]

A cornerstone of these self-esteem spaces was the provision of Black role models, particularly teaching staff, to counteract negative stereotypes and erasure in mainstream education. By placing Black adults in positions of respect and authority, supplementary schools offered children powerful counter-examples to prevailing negative representations. The movement consistently advocated for more Afro-Caribbean teachers in mainstream schools and greater Afro-Caribbean representation on school governing bodies, recognising the psychological significance of such representation. History lessons focused not only on stories of oppression to provide context for the racist society in which the children found themselves, but also on great Black figures so that children 'can have a pride in themselves and know that black people can achieve'.[208] Schools stocked biographies and pamphlets about significant individuals from Black history, such as Mary Seacole.[209]

The subjects taught in supplementary schools were chosen to serve the dual purposes of providing supplemental tutoring in traditional subjects like maths and English, to promote attainment in the state schools children attended during the week, and also to introduce and connect Black children to West Indian customs and traditions.[210] The Queen Mother Moore School in Lambeth, for example, offered a wide ranging of subjects and themes, including

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[206] Mirza and Reay, 'Spaces and Places', p.533.
[207] Andrews, *Resisting Racism*, p.39.
[208] LMA/4774/C/01/01/001, Minutes of General Meeting, 1989.
[209] London Metropolitan Archive, Afro-Caribbean Education Resource (ACER), LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, 'ACER Order Form', 1989.
[210] Andrews, *Resisting Racism*, pp.27-8.

'English (Reading, Writing, Discussion, Grammar), Maths, Afro-Caribbean Studies, Computing, Drama, Typing, African Dance, Science'.[211] Other schools used traditional subjects to delivery culturally-affirming lessons. Marcia Wright who coordinated supplementary classes at the Ahfiwe School at the 'Gresham Road Project' which held lessons every evening after school and on Saturdays, focused on English, maths and a 'history syllabus taught on the history of the Caribbean and the black struggle'.[212]

These curricula directly countered the absence or denigration of Black history and culture in mainstream schools. Dedicated organisations emerged to support this work, including the Afro-Caribbean Education Resource (ACER), which established partnerships with educational authorities including the ILEA as part of their multicultural education policy. ACER created a 'central resource bank' of materials on Caribbean history and culture, and developed stories featuring diverse characters in which Black children could see themselves represented.[213] Ansel Wong, founder of the Ahfiwe supplementary school, was heavily involved in this initiative, demonstrating the close connection between supplementary schools and broader curricular innovation.[214]

Reconnection with cultural and geographical 'roots' through less traditional mediums, like self-expression, seminars, and school trips also formed a significant part of many schools' curricula. The schools typically embraced a broad, transnational conception of Black identity that transcended island-specific or national boundaries.[215] Curriculum elements like 'African Dance' supported this expansive sense of identity and belonging. The idea that there was connection between one's roots and one's psychological wellbeing was made clear in the supplementary school movement. Andrews outlines this in his account of Black supplementary schools in Britain, quoting the Ealing Community Relations Council who proclaimed:

> A child sundered from his family roots and language and atmosphere of his infant years risks psychological damage ("rootlessness") and social damage (exacerbated culture clashes within the family.[216]

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[211] LMA/4774/C/01/07/002, Queen Mother Moore School Handbook, 1985.
[212] LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, Schools 'Conference Report on Black Supplementary Schools', 1982.
[213] Rob Waters, 'Student Politics, Teaching Politics, Black Politics: An Interview with Ansel Wong', *Race & Class* 58.1 (2016), p.23.
[214] London Metropolitan Archives, Afro-Caribbean Education Resource (ACER), LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, 'Afro-Caribbean Education Resource (ACER) Project'' information Leaflet, (undated).
[215] Gerrard, *Radical Childhoods*, p.147.
[216] Andrews, *Resisting Racism*, p.71.

Some schools – particularly those with local authority or UN funding – addressed concerns by organising international trips to the Caribbean, aimed at 'creating genealogical links with black history and geography for the students'.[217] These experiences were understood to have profound psychological significance. After a trip by Queen Mother Moore School pupils to Dominica, the coordinator reported that such contact with ancestral 'roots' was 'one of the most vital requisites in the mental development of the majority of black children who are living in this predominantly white society'.[218] By meeting with Black people in positions of authority including the Prime Minister, the Chief Inspector of Police, and the director of education, who held their roles 'with such confidence', the coordinator reported that the trip had strengthened both the children's 'self-concept' and their 'racial concept' which had been 'eroded by the suppressive nature of British society'.[219] When schools lacked funds for international travel, local alternatives were created. The Queen Mother Moore School took 90 students, parents, and teachers to a mock African village called Aklowa in Essex, and organised numerous trips to London exhibitions and performances related to Black lives and culture.[220] These experiences grounded abstract concepts of cultural pride in tangible, shared experiences.

While the majority of activities at supplementary schools focused either on tuition in traditional subjects or emphasising collective identity, they also attended to individual development. Some of ACER's published titles for schools were explicitly committed to promoting individual self-esteem. A resource pack titled *I'm special: myself* was designed to help young children aged three to seven explore their identities and feelings.[221] In their rationale for multicultural education, ACER explained that such approaches would both 'prevent negative, patronising or stereotyped views amongst teachers and pupils' and 'instil in all young people confidence and pride in their own cultural roots', showing pupils 'that the school values them as individuals as well as members of ethnic and cultural groups'.[222]

Many of the schools structured their educational provision to support individualised learning while maintaining community connection. The SCPG's Saturday and Thursday classes used detailed intake assessments to understand each child's specific abilities, and showed

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[217] Gerrard, *Radical Childhoods*, p.147.
[218] LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, Queen Mother Moore School Annual Report, 1986.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Eva Ulrike Pirker, *Narrative Projects of a Black British History* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), p.4.
[221] LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, 'ACER Order Form', 1989.
[222] LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, 'Rampton Follow-up Report' 1982.

flexibility in accommodating diverse needs – for instance, providing additional language support for a Somalian family.[223] At the Queen Mother Moore School, Rev. Hewlette 'Hewie' Andrew reported that their English and Maths teaching was 'increasingly taking the direction of individualised learning'.[224] But this attention to individual development was seldom divorced from collective aims; Ansel Wong's Ahfiwe school explicitly sought both 'personal development' for Black children and a collective 'understanding and appreciation of the black experience'.[225]

Perhaps the most powerful example of this integration of individual and collective development was the practice of 'grounding' at the Queen Mother Moore School. Based on Walter Rodney's 1969 work *Groundings With My Brothers*, these weekly intergenerational sessions featured speakers sharing experiences of the Black diaspora, with children, parents, teachers and visitors. All participants were encouraged to contribute. As the school coordinator explained:

> Grounding sessions are crucial because our students need to know who they are, and they cannot know who they are unless they know where they come from and as someone put it "The shortest way to the future is always one that involves a deep understanding of the past." Knowing their history is one of the surest ways of restoring confidence in our students and gives them a positive outlook for their future.[226]

These pedagogical innovations directly embodied the critical psychology developed within the movement. Unlike mainstream approaches that increasingly adopted remedial approaches to self-esteem to overcome social contexts, supplementary schools created environments that demonstrated how self-concept was fundamentally shaped by representation, historical knowledge, and cultural connection. By centring Black experiences and achievements, these spaces actively challenged the fatalistic assumptions about 'Black self-hatred' prevalent in mainstream psychology.

Finally we turn to examine how young Black people who participated in supplementary schools actively constructed, experienced and navigated concepts of self-esteem as an

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[223] LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Annual Report 1988-1989.
[224] LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, Queen Mother Moore School Annual Report, 1986.
[225] London Metropolitan Archives, LMA/4463/D/10/01/002, Ahfiwe Supplementary School, Journal of the Ahfiwe School and Abeng, No.1, 1972.
[226] LMA/4774/C/01/07/002, Queen Mother Moore School Handbook, 1985.

'emotional frontier' within the Black supplementary schools movement in the 1980s. Rather than rejecting self-esteem discourse outright, they reclaimed and redefined it as a fundamental right systematically denied through racist educational practices. For the young Black pupils, self-esteem became both a site of struggle and a political tool, representing tangible, experiential evidence of educational inequality that demanded collective action rather than individual psychological intervention. Through their creative writing and testimonies, the children articulated how racism affected their psychological wellbeing while simultaneously asserting cultural pride as a source of resilience and resistance. Their poems and essays, produced at supplementary schools and published in annual reports and publicity material, reveal not only the psychological impact of racism but also their critical analysis of how educational institutions perpetuated these mental injuries. Children utilised creative expression to navigate the complexities of dual identity, process experiences of marginalisation, and ultimately claim self-esteem as a political right. Their voices reveal self-esteem not as a depoliticising, individualising concept but as part of an overtly political, collective emotional architecture that framed positive self-feeling as an entitlement systematically violated in educational institutions.

Parents and educators regularly celebrated improvements in children's confidence as evidence of their schools' success. The SCPG reported their children had 'grown in their self-confidence and have made marked improvement in their skills'. One coordinator reflected enthusiastically on witnessing children arriving 'with heads bowed withdrawn and silent' who now 'walk into the room with a "good day"' displaying 'happy faces, youngsters eager to arrive and to get on with their work'.[227] Yet attending to children's own creative expressions reveals a far more complex reality than these sometimes triumphant narratives suggest. Their writing demonstrates how they grappled with competing ideals and conflicting conceptions of selfhood, often moving fluidly between expressing the pain of racist encounters and asserting a sense of inherent cultural pride. Jessica White notes that 'lived experiences are complex and at times ambivalent and contradictory' – a complexity essential to understanding how Black Britons challenged 'stereotypical representations'.[228] Attending to children's creative expressions allows us to move beyond what Ian Grosvenor critiques as

[227] London Metropolitan Archives, Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Annual Report, 1989-1990.
[228] Dionne Taylor, '"It's Not Even an Attitude… But a Way of Being!" Negotiating Black British Women's Lived Experiences', in *Blackness at the Intersection* eds. Kimberle Crenshaw, Kehinde Andrews and Annabel Wilson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), p.126.

the tendency to 'particularis[e], homogenis[e], and isolat[e] black experiences' in reductionist narratives.[229] Examining children's writings provides a necessary corrective to both psychological models that have historically pathologised Black selfhood and to historical narratives that have obscured children's agency. William Cross calls for approaches that recognise 'diversity and complexity in Black psychological functioning' rather than adhering to either 'overly pejorative' or 'romantic propensities'.[230] By analysing how Black British children constructed rights-based understandings of self-esteem through creative expression, this section contributes to that more nuanced historical and psychological understanding.

This analysis draws on published work from several supplementary schools including the Ahfiwe school, the SCPG, the Queen Mother Moore School, and Association of Community Education Resources (ACER) essay competitions from the 1970s and 1980s. It also examines records from a 1989 conference titled 'Young Black Pupils Speaking for Young Black Pupils' where children gathered to 'articulate their feelings and experiences freely' about their education.[231] The supplementary schools movement deliberately centred children's voices, with schools regularly publishing student work to demonstrate both academic progress and to position children as vital contributors to their activism. ACER noted when launching its essay competition:

> We feel that they are the best persons to express their own experiences. These are by no means isolated. Failure to treat the views of these young people with the seriousness which it deserves can only result in further alienation leading to a worsening situation in the school system.[232]

Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe have argued that self-expression constitutes a fundamental aspect of developing selfhood, particularly for marginalised communities whose identities have been subject to 'cultural imperialism' which works to 'undermin[e] [their] positive sense of self and social identity'.[233] Creative expression enables marginalised people to move past stereotypes and form 'definitions of self and culture which confirm [their] inventiveness and [their] will to survive'.[234] Young people in school students' unions and those involved in the supplementary schools movement found creative writing both an accessible and empowering

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[229] Ian Grosvenor, *Assimilating Identities: Racism and Education Policy in Post-1945 Britain* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997), p.198.
[230] Cross, *Shades of Black*, p.xiii.
[231] LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Annual Report 1988-1989.
[232] LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, Rampton Follow-up Report, 1982.
[233] Bryan et al, *Heart of the Race*, p.81.
[234] Ibid., p.83.

way to articulate and assert their perspectives. Children wrote extensively about how racism affected their self-concept, but they articulated these experiences not simply as descriptions of personal psychological harm but as critiques of systemic injustice. Their writings reveal how they understood racism as both individualised encounters and institutional practices that deliberately undermined their sense of self-worth.

Adults involved in the movement recognised that children possessed acute awareness of racism. Bernard Coard's influential 1971 pamphlet had highlighted the psychological impact of racism, noting that the Black child 'feels [...] he is fighting a losing battle. He becomes so consumed with fear, inner rage and hatred, that he is unable to think clearly'.[235] Children were sometimes encouraged to depict their negative experiences to act as mouthpieces justifying the necessity of the movement. ACER's 1980 essay competition was designed to demonstrate the extent to which 'children themselves were aware of their plight and the conditions in which they find themselves'.[236] Indeed, the children's compositions displayed a profound understanding of the nature and impact of the racism they experienced. Disun Majek wrote about encounters with racism using rhythmic repetition to convey relentlessness:

> *At primary school – no better*
> *Taunts, abuse, we the minority*
> *Took stick from the white majority*.[237]

Many young authors commented on the way in which they were directed toward sports rather than academic subjects in school. One poet captured this widespread aspect of teachers' expectations:

> *But end of term reports*
> *Read with familiar words*
> *"Excels at sports,*
> *Lack in reading and understanding*...".[238]

By juxtaposing the clipped school report against its profound impact, the author turned individual experience into political critique. In a similar vein, other pupils analysed how they

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[235] Coard, *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal*, p.25.
[236] LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, Rampton Follow-up Report, 1982.
[237] Ibid.
[238] Ibid.

were systematically channelled toward CSE examinations rather than 'O' Levels, recognising these as deliberate limitations. One student described feeling 'betrayed' by teachers who refused to recognise their capabilities, demonstrating how children understood these experiences as manifestations of systemic racism.[239]

Children's writings also covered their cultural erasure – and outright discrimination – in the mainstream school curriculum. Fifteen-year-old Mabel Taunu critiqued the white normativity of her school lessons:

> The lessons we are taught in school have almost nothing to do with Black people at all. In history, we barely hear about the slave trade and in sociology we always hear of an African primitive tribe which always seem to correspond with whatever the sociologist was studying.[240]

Taunu's observations demonstrate how children recognised that curricular choices reflected and reinforced hierarchies of knowledge and worth, reflecting broader concerns within the Black educational movement where activists had been calling for Black Studies programmes as well as supplementary Black education. Shortly after the National Curriculum introduction following the Education Reform Act 1988, which many Black educators had criticised for its Eurocentric focus, facilitators at the 'Young Black Pupils' conference documented how children connected cultural erasure to belonging: 'The absence of Black History on the curriculum made them feel that they had no history. Therefore, they belonged nowhere'.[241] Rather than merely expressing hurt feelings, children articulated how curricular choices communicated messages about who belonged within educational institutions.

Curricular marginalisation was often compounded by overt racist harassment. One student commented: 'I expect some respect... The teachers treat you like little children... Mr [...] mimics the dialect of black people and whenever he does so the rest of the children laugh'.[242] The emphasis on 'respect' indicates how children framed these experiences as violations of dignity and basic rights – a framing that would become central to their understanding of self-esteem. Indeed, the young authors were concerned with how racist treatment directly impacted their psychological wellbeing. Mabel Taunu analysed:

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[239] LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Caribbean Parents Group Five Year Review 1975 -1980.
[240] LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, Rampton Follow-up Report, 1982.
[241] London Metropolitan Archives, LMA/4463/D/11/01/001, Willis Wilkie, Young Black Pupils Talking for Young Black Pupils Conference: Notes on the Conference, 1989.
[242] Ibid.

> The most fundamental aspect of growing up in a white society is realising for the first time that you will be treated differently because you are of a different colour [...] I think the awareness of one's colour makes one more conscious of the social condition of Black people.[243]

Her analysis moved from personal experience to collective consciousness, demonstrating how children shared an understanding with parents' groups that positioned individual experiences as connected to broader social conditions.

Children's creative expressions and intimations consistently framed psychological harm not merely as personal distress but as evidence of injustice that demanded redress. This rights-based interpretation of racist harm was central to how children conceptualised and asserted their claims to self-esteem. While they documented experiences of racism, they were equally likely to articulate how cultural pride served as resilience and self-affirmation.[244] Their writings reveal that self-concept was rarely defined solely by negative experiences; instead, many drew on cultural heritage to assert positive identity grounded in inherent worth rather than external validation. A poem titled 'Heritage Lost' by a pupil named Godfrey Duncan was featured in a SCPG conference programme and explicitly traced a shift from imposed shame to more self-assertive pride:

> *The youth in the ghetto knows about pain and sorrow*
> *He knows how to live his life*
> *He knows what he has to give to survive*
> *For he has lived in the dirt and the grime*
> *Man it is hard to have any pride*
> *But don't you think it's time*
> *That we dug ourselves out of our self-pity*
> *And started to regain the pride of our ancestors*.[245]

Richard Allen's distinction between two models of Black selfhood proved useful here. One he described as 'reactive', based on 'external rather than internal forces' including racist encounters, and the other as largely internal, 'independent of white domination'.[246] The culturally-minded model emphasised 'an unavoidable and intimate connection between the

[243] LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, Rampton Follow-up Report, 1982.
[244] LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, Queen Mother Moore School Annual Report 1986.
[245] LMA/4463/D/03/03, Conference Programme, June 1980.
[246] Allen, *Concept of Self*, p.175.

love of Africa and things African, and the love of self'.[247] Children's creative expressions frequently embodied this culturally-minded selfhood, though their identities were typically more complex than either model alone could capture.

Published collections include numerous examples of children invoking cultural Black pride. Thirteen-year-old Lloyd Hiles' poem 'Freedom' linked civil rights resistance to cultural legitimacy:

> *We Blacks fight for our freedom*
> *We fight for our rights*
> *No one listens -- they all get uptight*
> *We live in pain for all of our lives*
> *Just because we are Black they think we are fools*
> *But let me tell you something we are born to rule*
> *We have had great people like Malcolm X*
> *He fought for the freedom of us Blacks*
> *Why can't we do the same for our families?*
> *We are Blacks and there is nothing to stop us*.[248]

The collective voice Hiles adopted positioned his individual expression within broader community struggle. His assertion about innate power and strength not only inverted power hierarchies and rejected imposed social inferiority, but freedom also brought with it a realisation of innate worth, power and potential. Fourteen-year-old David Townsend's 1985 poem 'Black Pride' was more explicit still in its connection drawn between cultural pride and overcoming psychological injuries of racism:

> *Black pride is alive*
> *Alive like a dead man's spirit*
> *Black pride is alive*
> *You can show it, you may hide it*
> *But no one can deny it.*
> *It's alive when someone praises you*
> *It's alive when you think about your Culture*
> *Black Pride is alive*

[247] Ibid., p.177.
[248] LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, Queen Mother Moore School Annual Report 1986.

Don't be hurt if someone makes fun of your race
It's part of the problems we face
So shout it loud
I'm Black and I'm Proud.[249]

Townsend's direct instruction revealed how he translated cultural pride teachings into practical strategies for navigating racist encounters. The final line deliberately echoed James Brown's 1968 song, connecting individual expression to broader traditions of Black cultural activism. Pupil poems about Black pride were not mere descriptions but calls to actions. They described an anti-racist mission of reclamation of innate pride in identity. As part of this 'mission', young people also suggested practical solutions for fostering positive self-image. At the 'Young Black Pupils' conference, children repeatedly suggested increasing Black teachers in schools, whom they believed would show them 'respect' and take greater interest in 'their ability to learn'. Some explicitly advocated this because it would give children 'a more positive image of themselves, and remove the feeling of alienation'.[250] Children created and valued Black spaces as sites for secure self-development. Fourteen-year-old Yvonne Rickets explained:

> The Black kids and all other kids who are not white feel that they should apologise for their colour but when I am with my own kind, I feel welcome, happy and I feel I don't have to worry about white kids calling me names.[251]

In the correct environment, it felt possible to the young authors that pride could be fostered and celebrated. This was an important aspect of the way in which supplementary schools framed positive self-regard and identity as a right denied in racist society. In their writing, children framed positive self-image not merely as personal feeling but as an entitlement systematically denied through racist educational practices. This rights-based understanding produced expressions of anger and calls for collective action that positioned children as significant actors in the struggle for psychological liberation. Indeed, their creative writing exhibited clear frustration over the denial of positive self-regard, which intersected with children's feelings of voicelessness. Willis Wilkie's report on the 1989 conference captured this: 'The youngsters were able to articulate their feelings and experiences freely [...] It was

[249] Ibid.
[250] LMA/4463/D/11/01/001, Willis Wilkie, Young Black Pupils […] Notes on the Conference, 1989.
[251] LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, Rampton Follow-up Report, 1982.

as if they were waiting for the opportunity to pour it all out'.[252] This characterisation suggested they understood their negative self-feelings not as inevitable personal shortcomings but as imposed restrictions that could and should be challenged. A poem in the Ahfiwe school journal titled 'Black Women's Feelings' expressed this understanding around respect and liberation:

> *Deep frustration*
> *Pent up confusion*
> *Full of deep longing*
> *Frustration to be heard […]*
> *The time has come for her voice to be heard*
> *Frustration released*.[253]

The demand 'to be heard' also reflected reclamation of the right to positive self-definition. When experiences were denied or overlooked, children recognised that this compounded their psychological burden. In the ACER 1980 collection, one pupil wrote about how in early childhood the 'humiliation' of racist harassment often went unrecognised, and children learned to cope by ignoring it. Only later did she develop the urge 'to stand up [...] and fight back'.[254] This trajectory from acceptance to resistance demonstrated evolving consciousness of self-worth as something that should be demanded rather than requested.

Similarly, children expressed frustration at how their feelings about racism were dismissed. One pupil reported being shown a video about the Ku Klux Klan while nothing was taught about 'discrimination on our own experience and feelings', concluding that 'the teachers make up your feelings for you'.[255] This critique challenged the denial of emotional autonomy – the right to define one's own psychological responses to racism. Nineteen-year-old Michael Coke urged peers to 'campaign against racial discrimination and go on demonstrations against the National Front'. He noted it was 'really tragic' that young people had to resort to 'drastic actions simply to be recognised, respected and treated fairly in the society in which one was brought up'.[256] Coke's framing positioned respect and fair treatment – as a core component of self-regard – as basic rights that should not require extraordinary struggle.

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[252] LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Annual Report 1988-1989.
[253] LMA/4463/D/10/01/002, Journal of the Ahfiwe School and Abeng, No.1, 1972.
[254] LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, Rampton Follow-up Report, 1982.
[255] LMA/4463/D/11/01/001, Willis Wilkie, Young Black Pupils […] Notes on the Conference, 1989.
[256] LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, Rampton Follow-up Report, 1982.

Others were more open to the idea of reclaiming pride through struggle. Lloyd Hiles' poem featured a call to action to avoid 'shame':

> *We live in a city of blacks and whites […]*
> *I am going to get my freedom if it kills me*
> *What about you?*
> *If you don't get your freedom you will live in shame*.[257]

His direct equation of inaction and lack of freedom with living 'in shame' explicitly connected self-esteem to political liberation, and positioned positive self-regard as something that must be claimed rather than granted. In a similar vein, Grace Quansah's poem 'Self-Realisation' explicitly connected self-concept to political consciousness, urging readers to 'take a look' at themselves: 'You are in control / awareness or apathy'.[258] The poem framed self-discovery as foundation for political choice, positioning self-esteem as starting point for broader liberation struggles. Mabel Taunu's essay connected curricular bias to resistance, noting that recognition of biased curricula would cause the Black pupil to 'retaliate against the system'.[259] Fifteen-year-old Julia Monica Plenty framed 'failure' in school as resistance itself. Those who did not achieve high grades were 'rejecting a system which doesn't cater for them'.[260] A pupil from Norwood School called for assertive collective action, drawing comparisons with other communities' movements against racism: 'Indian people fight for their colour and we only talk of our colour... we should do more than just talk'.[261] This critique directly challenged adults to match rhetorical claims of pride with concrete action and represented powerful assertion of agency and subverted narratives of failure linked to low self-esteem. By choosing to reject a system that denied them respect, children reclaimed control over their self-definition and claims to cultural pride.

Children could be more assertive about reclaiming their right to pride and self-esteem than their parents. Michael Hutchinson critiqued what he perceived as parental complacency, arguing that some parents believed that 'by going to school that education can be "rubbed" onto their children'.[262] This critique reversed typical generational dynamics, positioning the child as more politically conscious than the parent. Hutchinson called for formation of a

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[257] LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, Queen Mother Moore School Annual Report, 1986.
[258] LMA/4463/D/03/03, Conference Programme, June 1980.
[259] LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, Rampton Follow-up Report, 1982.
[260] Ibid.
[261] LMA/4463/D/10/01/002, Journal of the Ahfiwe School and Abeng, No.1, 1972.
[262] LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, Rampton Follow-up Report, 1982.

Black Parents' Association to build critical resistance to schools' treatment of Black children.[263] This proposal positioned children not as objects of concern but as potential catalysts for adult political organisation. Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe documented this generational shift, noting that the 'new generation of Black schoolgirls' who began education in Britain from the 1960s 'were not so inclined to regard the schools through the less critical eyes of some of our parents'.[264] Inspired by civil rights movements and Black Power, this generation emerged when 'cultural pride was no longer a matter for discussion' and being Black 'had become a source of strength'.[265]

Children's writing demonstrated their active participation in constructing this sense of cultural pride. They creatively adapted educational messages about heritage and identity, transformed historical knowledge into personal empowerment strategies, and developed analyses of institutional barriers to positive self-image. Despite the arguments and responses set out by pupils in their own writing, their ideas coexisted with a feeling among adults in the movement that children 'were intelligent, sensitive people' who broadly understood racism in schools', but were considered 'not sophisticated enough to cope adequality with the situation'.[266] This potential for intergenerational friction was just one way in which the path of mobilisation to reclaim pride and self-esteem was not straightforward.

Another such barrier was the challenge of reconciling their identities as both Black and British. Children's writings revealed how negotiating dual identities directly shaped self-esteem. Rather than experiencing self-worth in simple ways, their creative expressions demonstrated how self-esteem existed at the complex intersection of racial pride and national belonging, creating psychological tensions they actively worked to navigate. Bryan and colleagues' 1984 study provided important context. They observed that in Britain, there was a 'notion that whiteness and success are synonymous', creating 'confusing' self-concept for minority groups. However, this confusion was significantly mitigated by 'perpetuation of culture' which acted as protection against pressures to 'act white'. Engaging with traditional Black culture served as 'a buffer against the society's assaults on our identity'.[267] The concept of 'double consciousness' originally developed by W.E.B. DuBois provides useful framework. Allen describes this as a process whereby multiple sources of selfhood – both

[263] Ibid.
[264] Bryan et al, *Heart of the Race*, p.37.
[265] Ibid.
[266] LMA/4774/C/01/03/001, Annual Report 1988-1989.
[267] Bryan et al, *Heart of the Race,* p.91.

positive cultural pride and negative experiences of racism – 'are vying for space in the same Black body'.[268] Nineteen-year-old Michael Hutchinson directly addressed how this tension impacted his self-concept:

> I am proud to be Black, my only problem is being British. As a Black man I do not see colour as a misfortune. If anything I see being born in Britain as a misfortune of nationality.[269]

While his racial identity functioned as a source of positive self-regard, his national identity undermined this, revealing how young people differentiated between aspects of identity that enhanced or diminished their sense of self-worth. Similarly, sixteen-year-old Rosamund articulated how intersecting identities affected her self-concept, noting that being 'British and Black' meant 'having to work four times as hard' to achieve the same opportunities, leaving her feeling 'disillusioned and frustrated'.[270] Elaine expressed similar impact: 'being British is a burden because we're also Black in a White society'.[271] Her formulation revealed how self-esteem was diminished not by either aspect of identity alone, but by their specific combination within a racist context. These expressions demonstrate how DuBois' 'double consciousness' operated as both challenge to and potential resource for self-esteem. In DuBois' framework, this psychological duality was not merely conflict but also potential strength. As Allen argues, despite being subjected to 'constant attack' in the context of racist society, 'the culture provides the people the wherewithal to develop a positive sense of self or the means to "resolve the tension between pride and shame in self"'.[272]

The complexity of this process was also evident in how children sometimes internalised negative stereotypes while building positive self-concepts. One conference facilitator reported a girl asking for 'more Black PE teachers because we are better at sports', recorded as 'the tragic result of internal, covert racism'.[273] This demonstrated how children's self-esteem could be simultaneously bolstered by assertions of racial excellence while undermined by internalising limiting stereotypes. Children's writings reveal neither uncomplicated pride nor straightforward self-hatred, but rather active engagement with maintaining positive self-worth despite contradictory social messaging. They recognised that

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[268] Allen, *Concept of Self,* p.166.
[269] LMA/4774/C/03/04/007, Rampton Follow-up Report, 1982.
[270] Ibid.
[271] Ibid.
[272] Allen, *Concept of Self*, p.29.
[273] LMA/4463/D/11/01/001, Willis Wilkie, Young Black Pupils […] Notes on the Conference, 1989.

self-esteem was constantly negotiated, that pride and feelings of diminishment could coexist, and that building positive self-regard required ongoing critical reflection.

Within the Black supplementary schools movement, children were not merely recipients of efforts to bolster their self-esteem but active participants in defining what self-esteem meant in political terms, although they were not always listened to. They recognised the limitations of individualised approaches to racism and called on their communities for structural change that would allow genuine rather than rhetorical affirmation of self-worth. Like teachers and parents, children rejected psychological fatalism about their self-image. Although they acknowledged racism's impact on their self-image and school experience, they were often defiant – drawing their sense of self-worth from pride in culture and community, and citing influential civil rights figures as inspirations. Through creative expression, they processed intersected experiences of racial and age-based marginalisation, translating individual experiences into collective political consciousness. This nuanced navigation of self-worth at the intersections of race, nationality, and age represented a significant moment for how children in England conceptualised their own claims to self-esteem. Their writings reveal they viewed self-esteem not merely as a personal feeling but as a right systematically denied to them through racist educational norms and practices. Despite the challenges of stabilising identity as Black children in a predominantly white society, they consistently framed positive self-image as an entitlement and used their voices to call on adults to take more assertive action. Their self-expression, situated alongside that of students involved in school students' unions, constitute a poignant example of a generation developing their own frameworks for cultivating positive self-worth as a route to empowerment.

5.3 Personal Politics: Some Tensions

Both the school student unions and the supplementary school movement outlined above bestowed transformative potential onto self-feeling. By understanding self-esteem as a right to assert and a feeling to reclaim, they each developed knew a new psychopolitical framework for understanding oppression and working to overcome it. Yet both movements witnessed significant tension and uncertainty from within their ranks about the place of psychology and emotion in activism. Some actors involved in the movements recognised the risk that psychological discourse might inadvertently individualise structural problems or provide superficial alternatives to material change. These tensions were neither accidental nor

easily resolved but reflected deeper contradictions inherent in attempting to politicise concepts originally designed for individual adjustment and social control.

Within the school student movement, these ambivalences manifested as debates about balancing individual expression with collective action. The SAU gradually became critical of what they perceived as overemphasis on issues of personal freedom, with one conference resolution noting that 'too much attention to "repression" in schools' had led to 'publicity stunts' at the expense of engaging working-class students on more systemic concerns.[274] Internal correspondence revealed frustration that 'the majority in the union wish to campaign on the school uniform mainly, or social events' rather than embracing more explicitly political agendas focused on democratic governance and comprehensive education.[275]

These tensions reflected significant ideological splits between those who saw emotional autonomy as central to educational liberation and those who feared such focus diluted the collective, class-based struggle necessary for meaningful transformation. *Rebel* magazine warned that appeals to 'individual freedom and self-expression' could serve as 'diversionary' tactics that inadvertently reinforced 'the interests of the bureaucratic authorities.'[276] Such debates demonstrated a clear political consciousness but also revealed difficulties in maintaining structural critique whilst addressing intimate emotional needs.

Black supplementary schools experienced parallel tensions around the relationship between emotional wellbeing and academic achievement. Some Black educators questioned whether excessive focus on identity and self-esteem might obscure more fundamental issues of power and inequality. Maureen Stone's influential critique argued that preoccupation with self-concept in education could become 'a way of evading the real, and uncomfortable, issues of class and privilege in our society' by managing to 'ignore the vast body of evidence showing that working class and black families have much less access to power, to resources of every kind, than middle-class children.'[277]

Within the movement itself, speakers occasionally criticised approaches that prioritised emotional adjustment over practical outcomes. At a 1976 careers guidance meeting, one

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[274] Warwick Modern Records Centre, Schools Action Union, 601/K/5, 'Resolution Presented to SAU Conference by Labour Party Young Socialists Group', 1969.
[275] Warwick Modern Records Centre, Schools Action Union, K/601/1, Letter to Robert Labi from Sue Atkins, 9 February 1969.
[276] Warwick Modern Records Centre, Schools Action Union, 601/K/2, South London SAU, 'Rebel' Magazine 1.2, November 1969.
[277] Maureen Stone, *The Education of the Black Child in Britain: The Myth of Multiracial Education* (London: Fontana, 1981), p.8.

presenter urged parents to move beyond telling children 'you can do whatever you like as long as you are happy,' calling instead for concrete career advice that addressed systemic inequalities in employment. Gus John, a founding member of the Black Parents' Movement, resisted the notion that supplementary schools existed merely to 'treat Blacks for identity,' dismissing this as a 'white concept' that misunderstood the movement's more explicitly political aims.[278] These internal debates reveal both movements' awareness that self-esteem discourse carried inherent risks of co-optation and depoliticisation. Activists recognised that without explicit structural analysis and collective action, emphasis on emotional wellbeing could become another mechanism for encouraging individual adaptation to oppressive circumstances rather than challenging those circumstances directly.

5.4 Conclusion

In the history of self-feeling in England, the significance of the movements analysed here lies in the way they extended and made more explicit a growing awareness of the relationship between self-esteem and structural oppression. As young people, the young activists and their families were directly exposed to some of the shortcomings and contradictions in mainstream education. Despite longstanding commitments to the emotional and social development of children in schools, there were increasingly glaring discrepancies between promise and practice. The normalisation and promotion of self-esteem within mainstream education, combined with its notable absence in the lives of young people, prompted a reconceptualisation of self-feeling. Within school students' unions and Black supplementary schools, self-esteem was increasingly understood not as something to be earnt through accomplishment, but something that needed to be uncovered or asserted. For working-class and BAME students in particular, it was a right and entitlement that was systematically denied. This permitted an increasingly politicised and collective approach to self-feeling to emerge.

School student activists demonstrated how traditional educational structures created what the Liverpool School Action Committee termed a system 'geared to making us think we are second-rate', whilst Black communities documented how racist practices inflicted what the

[278] London Metropolitan Archives, Caribbean Parents Group, LMA/4774/C/01/07/001, Queen Mother Moore School: Notes on a Planning Meeting, 1st February 1987.

Southall Caribbean Parents Group condemned as 'psychological damage' on their children.[279] Rather than accepting damaged self-concept as evidence of personal deficiency, both movements positioned it as predictable outcome of oppressive structures. This rights-based understanding enabled them to challenge therapeutic approaches that encouraged individual adaptation whilst leaving oppressive circumstances unchanged.

The two movements adopted slightly different approaches. School students' unions focused on the importance of authentic individuality and democratic participation as routes to uncovering true self-esteem, untainted by the traditions of competitive meritocracy that they saw in mainstream schools. Meanwhile, Black supplementary schools focused on counteracting the low expectations and overt racism children experienced in schools with an emphasis on cultural pride as a more authentic, more community-oriented response. Both movements shared an emphasis on self-expression as a powerful vehicle through which their claims could be asserted. This was part of frustration in both movements about voicelessness as young people in a society which compounded their limited access to self-esteem. In each case, age and childhood status intersected with experiences of class and race and were key factors in the new psychopolitics of self-feeling.

The collective, political mobilisation of self-feeling by both groups reveals that self-esteem was neither neutral nor naturally individualising, but rather a site of struggle where marginalised groups could contest the very structures that created psychological distress. This was not a total revolution in self-feeling, however. From the late 1960s, the assertion of young people's right to feel good about themselves was met with ridicule, by conservative commentators, and from traditional leftists wary of individualising influences in radical politics.[280] Furthermore, by the late 1970s it would prove hard to sustain in the face of growing interest on the right in self-esteem as a proxy for personal responsibility within burgeoning neoliberalism. Nevertheless, youth activism in the 1970s and 1980s was an important moment for the politics of the personal, where self-feeling served an important politicising function for young people in England.

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[279] 601/K/3, 'Vanguard' Publication, No.3, 1969; LMA/4774/C/01/07/002, Statement by the Caribbean Parents Group (no date).

[280] Lacy, 'The Student Uproar', *The Illustrated London News*, 1968. Malcolm Muggeridge described student protest in 1968 as 'complete self-indulgence' and evidence of 'conceit'; Partridge 'Feeling Confident?', p.1. Elsewhere I have demonstrated tensions within the Women's Liberation Movement between recognising 'free-floating' capitalism and the recognition of more intimate, subtle forms of oppression through personal experience.

6. Conclusion

The trend towards a rights-based framework of self-feeling came to a climax in 1989, when the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrined emotional wellbeing as a fundamental human right. It required that children be protected from psychological harm and placed in environments fostering their 'health, self-respect and dignity'.[1] But this was not the result of a sudden 'Cambrian explosion' of interest in self-esteem born out of misplaced faith in the psychological to answer society's problems.[2] If England witnessed a 'self-esteem movement', it was a contested emotional revolution that took the best part of a century and was marked as much by anxiety as it was by enthusiasm.

This thesis has demonstrated that self-feeling has a history in England, one characterised by both continuity and disjuncture. From the interwar period onwards, self-feeling became both a matter of mainstream concern and a cultural battleground, with implications for individuals and society alike. After the Second World War, self-feeling was legitimate grounds for policy debate and implementation, increasingly inserted into narratives of national progress and social inequality. By the late 1960s, a diverse range of actors promoted positive self-regard as both symptom and cure for social ills. Policymakers, teachers, educational psychologists, activists, and young people engaged readily and frequently with the new common sense that self-feeling was society's concern.

The history of self-feeling in England is also a history of childhood. Although other populations – notably adult women – received 'confidence messaging', children were understood, defined and acted upon in relation to ideas about how they ought to feel about themselves.[3] Their behaviour, opportunities, and social responsibilities were framed at least in part within shifting ideas about inferiority, self-consciousness, egotism, and conceitedness. Part of the emotional revolution of self-feeling was the emergence of the ideal confident and independent child – an ideal few children resembled.

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[1] United Nations General Assembly Resolution 44/25, *Convention on the Rights of the Child,* 20 November 1989.
[2] Harrison, *Big Ego Trip*, p.20.
[3] Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture*, p.11.

This thesis set out to historicise self-feeling in England, problematising existing accounts of self-esteem that rely on top-down narratives of psychological governance, are dismissive of experiences of non-experts, and are overtly critical of self-esteem as a construct. Existing scholarship describes self-esteem's influence on modern society as 'cult'-like, functioning as a totalising psychological 'truth', and as a desirable commodity characterised by 'ubiquity and seductiveness'.[4] Conversely, this thesis finds that the history of self-feeling in England is a story of contention and remarkable malleability between sometimes contradictory worldviews. While concern with self-feeling was a constant, striking a balance between deficit and excess remained an elusive goal for policymakers, teachers, parents, and children themselves. Nevertheless, attempts to cultivate balanced, healthy, self-regarding children had real implications on the education and lives of young people in England.

Chapter Two demonstrated that popular enthusiasm for self-feeling emerged in the context of 'new' approaches to education and psychology. Long before the 'self-esteem movement' of the 1980s, self-feeling was attached to social hopes and fears. In this context, adults were tasked with cultivating healthy self-regard in their otherwise emotionally vulnerable children. This enthusiasm was accompanied by significant debate and tension. Chapter Three described how self-feeling underpinned policy discussion and debate in the years preceding the Second World War. It emerged as an important emotional rationale for educational restructuring that would have not only educational but social and psychological consequences for children in England. Policy was an arena in which self-feeling was both consolidated and contested. The idea that education should address children's self-feeling was largely uncontroversial, wielded as political justification on all ends of the political spectrum. Disagreement formed over how, why and to what extent self-feeling was privileged in education, and for what kinds of child. At various points, self-feeling was subject to interventions based on protection, enhancement, and restriction in efforts to cultivate well-adjusted, emotionally resilient, and socially responsible citizens.

This thesis also found that ideas about self-feeling were not an imposition from the top down, but came from multiple sites and sources. Chapter Four revealed how those outside of mainstream education created their own ends and means for fostering self-feeling in young people. For isolated mothers in playgroups, their children's independence was paramount to their own wellbeing. In radical outdoor education, individuality and self-sufficiency

[4] Ibid.,; Ward, 'Filling the World', p.1.; Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture*, p.11.

countered capitalist constraints. In workshops for disabled school leavers, self-confidence ensured independence and eased strain on welfare systems, while overconfidence was controlled to prepare young people for the harsh realities of unsympathetic and inaccessible workplaces. Within each of these movements, an idealised confident, independent, and resilient child emerged as the standard against which other children's emotional development was measured. Chapter Five explored the contradictions between confidence messaging and educational realities. It described how, for young activists, self-feeling was a lens through which to understand failures in the education system. Recognising the absence of self-esteem while they faced pressure to be happy and confident helped young activists develop critical analyses of school and society. Here, experiences of self-esteem that jarred with educational rhetoric about emotional wellbeing helped politicise and agitate, and encouraged children to redefine their ideal style of self-feeling around values of innate worth, social belonging, self-acceptance, and pride.

What emerges from this explorative history of self-feeling is a framework for understanding self-referential emotion in historical and cultural context. In recognising the cultural and temporal specificity of self-feeling, this framework recognises that self-feeling is fluid and contentious, rather than homogenous and totalising. It is as much about collective wellbeing as it is about personal development. In the twentieth-century, self-feeling functioned as a litmus test for social anxieties about the status of the individual, and as a way for the individual to understand their place and value in society. Self-feeling functioned as an emotional mediator, part of what Jon Lawrence describes as a process of reconciliation between the individual and the social world.[5] This anxious negotiation produced rich and varied cultures of self-feeling that continue to shape contemporary life, from therapeutic assumptions in educational practice to psychological frameworks through which social movements articulate demands for justice. Ideas about self-feeling underpinned sociocultural change in twentieth-century England, and provided an emotional reference point from which people understood and experienced that change.

The common sense of self-esteem continues to be ambiguous. Popular culture simultaneously embraces and ridicules preoccupation with self-feeling. At Glastonbury Festival in summer 2025, the singer we met in Chapter One, and who adopted the stage name *Self Esteem*, asked her audience 'if I'm so empowered, why am I such a coward?' In the 1990s, cartoon character

[5] Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?*, p.35.

Daria declared 'I like having low self-esteem; it makes me feel special'.[6] Both responses to the prevalence of confidence messaging lay bare the persistent gaps between emotional performance and reality, something also exposed in the growing academic literature critical of self-esteem, alongside other aspects of 'positive psychology' including happiness.[7] But this familiar scepticism exists alongside the sustained primacy of self-esteem in the context of education. In July 2025 the Department for Education released statutory guidance on Relationships and Sex Education. 'Effective teaching' was described as that which 'will support young people to cultivate positive characteristics including resilience, self-worth, self-respect, honesty, integrity, courage, kindness, and trustworthiness'.[8] By the end of primary school children were expected to understand 'the importance of self-respect and how this links to their own happiness', and were encouraged to 'think about how they foster their own self-esteem and build a strong sense of their own identity'. At secondary school, self-esteem was linked to pupils' ability to form healthy relationships with others.[9] Self-feeling continues to occupy the realm of common sense, and cultural idiosyncrasy.

Ending on this note of ambiguity may not seem particularly helpful or practicable to the policymaker or practitioner focused on the social and emotional wellbeing of young people. But I suggest that ambiguity provides grounds for optimism for progressive policy and practice.

The persistence of self-feeling as a contested ideal and a social norm should be understood not as a policy failure to be resolved, but a characteristic feature of modern culture that demands a different approach entirely. Rather than seeking to finally reconcile contested ideas about self-feeling, policymakers and practitioners should recognise how emotions such as self-esteem, self-confidence, and inferiority-feeling have functioned as emotional 'mediators' between individuals and society. Self-feeling has acted as a bridge between personal development and collective wellbeing, individual psychology and social organisation, emotional vulnerability and national progress. It operates in multiple directions: creating frameworks of emotional expectation for people as a whole, while also providing a

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[6] Self Esteem (2025) Performed by Self Esteem, Glastonbury Festival [27 June 2025]; 'Esteemsters', *Daria* MTV (3 March 1997).
[7] Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture*; Illouz and Cabanas, *Manufacturing Happy Citizen*; Ehrenreich, *Smile or Die*.
[8] Department for Education, *Relationships, Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education: Statutory Guidance for Governing Bodies, Proprietors, Head Teachers, Principals, Senior Leadership Teams, and Teachers* (July 2025).
[9] Ibid.

means for people to view their social world through the lens of selfhood and emotional wellbeing.

Understood as a cultural practice with a mediating function, self-feeling offers distinctive resources for educators and policymakers. Firstly, it opens up a possibility for cultivating critical literacy about self-feeling itself. The young activists examined in this thesis demonstrated that self-feeling can be a powerful framework for social change precisely because they understood it as culturally constructed rather than psychologically fixed. They used self-feeling as a framework for exposing and then addressing educational shortcomings, politicising their peers, and redefining healthy self-regard through creative self-expression. Their critical literacy of self-regard was key to their subversion of it. Rather than simply instilling confidence, educators might prepare children to navigate contradictory cultural messaging about self-feeling, helping them recognise when they are being asked to perform emotional conformity that jars with their own experience in society. This critical engagement with self-feeling can serve as a foundation for unpacking other taken-for-granted concepts in an age of contested truths.

Secondly, this thesis has demonstrated an emerging role for adults as providers, architects and 'caterers' of children's self-feeling. Adults too should recognise this as culturally specific practice. As such, conceptual flexibility about what 'healthy' self-feeling looks and feels like, and what sources it can be derived from, is essential in supporting the emotional wellbeing of others. Those framed as the beneficiaries of self-feeling in a given context should contribute to its definition and management. This is doubly important given that this research also demonstrated the intersectional nature of self-feeling experiences and interventions, as well as the construction of idealised versions of confidence personhood. People from different cultural contexts may relate differently to dominant ideas about confidence and self-feeling. Those working within a framework of self-feeling must embrace the cultural parameters and assumptions underlying their engagement with self-oriented emotions.

Finally, there is a warning contained here for policymakers, wellbeing officers, and anyone who works towards self-feeling as an outcome in its own right. They should be alert to discrepancies between rhetoric and reality in initiatives designed to target self-feeling, where the individual becomes expert and hypocrisies are readily exposed by those for whom interventions are intended. When self-feeling replaces structural and material intervention, these discrepancies become glaringly obvious. This thesis demonstrated that the most radical

and energetic applications of self-feeling came from its theoretical beneficiaries: children and young people themselves. If practitioners harness rather than suppress this transformative potential, self-feeling can be employed as socially-oriented rather than as a path to individualised responsibility for structural problems. It can illuminate what changes might maximise collective wellbeing, using emotion as a standpoint for understanding and transforming the social world. As a young participant in the 2023 school climate strikes reflected, 'self-confidence and clear communication are really important to changemaking'.[10] Understood not as a problem requiring resolution but as a social norm requiring critical engagement, self-feeling stands as a potentially powerful framework for progressive change.

[10] 'How A Young Changemaker Organised One of Manchester's Largest Climate Actions to Date', *Ashoka* < https://www.ashoka.org/en-gb/story/how-young-changemaker-organised-one-manchester%E2%80%99s-largest-climate-actions-date> [accessed 18 July 2025].

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